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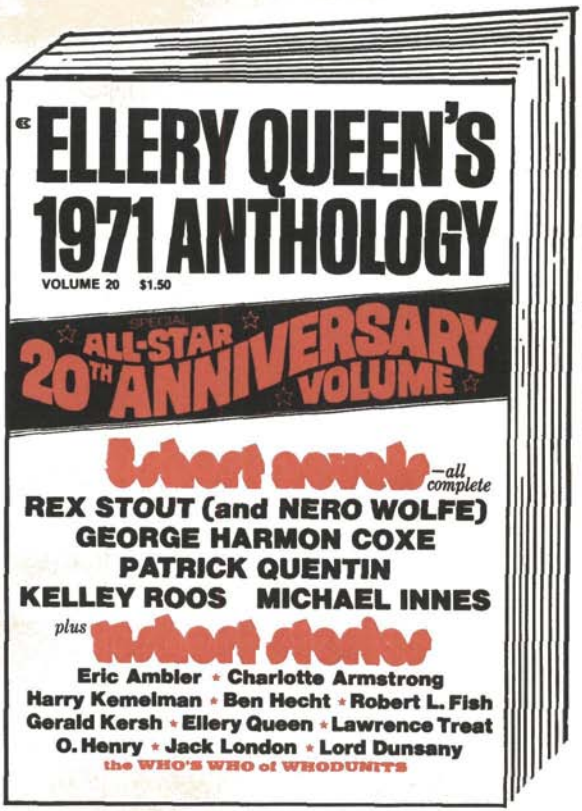
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DEAD ON CHRISTMAS STREET	John D. MacDonald	6
THE SPY AND THE DIPLOMAT'S DAUGHTER	Edward D. Hoch	20
THE GUN	Kathryn Gottlieb	34
THE PEACOCK	Eugenia Klein Gingold	50
THE UNBREAKABLE ALIBI	Agatha Christie	58
A SINGLE MINUTE OF FEAR	Richard A. Selzer	72
FOX AND GEESE	Robert S. Aldrich	83
THE UNKNOWN LAW	Avram Davidson	91
THE PIG STICKER	John Pierce	108
ONLY BET ON A SURE THING	Robert Edward Eckels	123
THE PLOT AGAINST SANTA CLAUS	James Powell	135
GAMBLING FEVER	Gerald Kersh	155
HARDCOVERS AND PAPERBACKS OF THE MONTH		49
THE JURY BOX	John Dickson Carr	80

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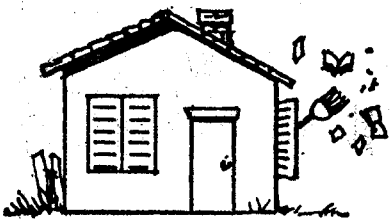

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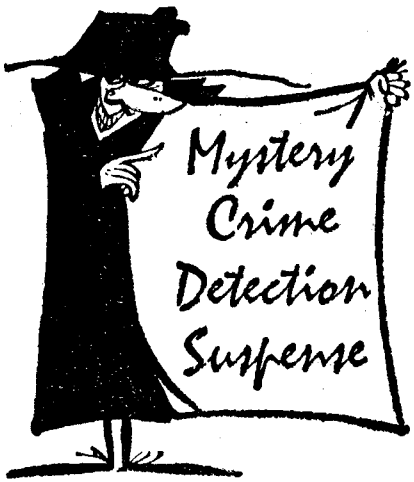

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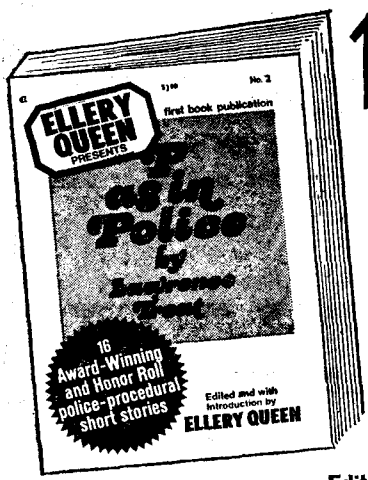

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a detective story by

JOHN D. MacDONALD

Loreen Garrity was the type to make a good witness—a positive sort of girl. And she was the only witness the cops had—until, the day before Christmas, she was pushed out of a window seventeen stories above the sidewalk . . .

DEAD ON CHRISTMAS STREET

by JOHN D. MacDONALD

THE POLICE IN THE FIRST prowl car on the scene got out a tarpaulin. A traffic policeman threw it over the body and herded the crowd back. They moved uneasily in the gray slush. Some of them looked up from time to time.

In the newspaper picture the window would be marked with a bold X. A dotted line would descend from the X to the spot where the covered body now lay. Some of the spectators, laden with tinsel- and evergreen-decorated packages, turned away, suppressing a nameless guilt.

But the curious stayed on. Across the street, in the window of a department store, a vast mechanical Santa rocked back and forth, slapping a mechanical hand against a padded thigh, roaring forever, "Whaw haw ho ho ho. Whaw haw ho ho ho." The slapping hand had worn the red plush from the padded thigh.

The ambulance arrived, with a brisk intern to make out the DOA. Sawdust was shoveled onto the sidewalk, then pushed off into the sewer drain. Wet snow fell into the city. And there was nothing else to see. The corner Santa, a leathery man with a pinched, blue nose, began to ring his hand bell again.

Daniel Fowler, one of the young Assistant District Attorneys, was at his desk when the call came through from Lieutenant Shinn of the Detective Squad. "Dan? This is Gil. You

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heard about the Garrity girl yet?"

For a moment the name meant nothing, and then suddenly he remembered: Loreen Garrity was the witness in the Sheridan City Loan Company case. She had made positive identification of two of the three kids who had tried to pull that holdup, and the case was on the calendar for February. Provided the kids didn't confess before it came up, Dan was going to prosecute. He had the Garrity girl's statement, and her promise to appear.

"What about her, Gil?" he asked.

"She took a high dive out of her office window—about an hour ago. Seventeen stories, and right into the Christmas rush. How come she didn't l a n d on somebody, we'll never k n o w. Connie Wyant is handling it. He remembered she figured in the loan-company deal, and he told me. Look, Dan. She was a big girl, and she tried hard not to go out that window. She was shoved. That's how come Connie has it. Nice Christmas present for him."

"Nice Christmas present for the lads who pushed over the loan company, too," Dan said grimly. "Without her there's no case. Tell Connie that. It ought to give him the right line."

Dan Fowler set aside the brief he was working on and walked down the hall. The District Attorney's secretary was at her desk. "Boss busy, Jane?"

She was a small girl with wide, gray eyes, a mass of dark hair, a soft mouth. She raised one eyebrow and l o o k e d at him speculatively. "I could be bribed, you know."

He looked around with exaggerated caution, went around her desk on tiptoe, bent and kissed her upraised lips. He smiled down at her. "People are beginning to talk," he whispered, not getting it as light as he meant it to be.

She tilted her head to one side, frowned, and said, "What is it, Dan?"

He sat on the corner of her desk and took her hands in his, and he told her about the big, dark-haired, swaggering woman who had gone out the window. He knew Jane would want to know. He had regretted bringing Jane in on the case, but he had had the unhappy hunch that Garrity might sell out, if the offer was high enough. And so he had enlisted Jane, depending on her intuition. He had taken the two of them to lunch, and had invented an excuse to duck out and leave them alone.

Afterward, Jane had said, "I guess I don't really like her, Dan. She was suspicious of me, of course, and she's a terribly vital sort of person. But I would say that she'll be willing to testify. And I don't think she'll sell out."

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Now as he told her about the girl, he saw the sudden tears of sympathy in her gray eyes. "Oh, Dan! How dreadful! You'd better tell the boss right away. That Vince Servius must have hired somebody to do it."

"Easy, lady," he said softly.

He touched her dark hair with his fingertips, smiled at her, and crossed to the door of the inner office, opened it and went in.

Jim Heglon, the District Attorney, was a narrow-faced man with glasses that had heavy frames. He had a professional look, a dry wit, and a driving energy.

"Every time I see you, Dan, I have to conceal my annoyance," Heglon said. "You're going to cart away the best secretary I ever had."

"Maybe I'll keep her working for a while. Keep her out of trouble."

"Excellent! And speaking of trouble—"

"Does it show, Jim?" Dan sat on the arm of a heavy leather chair which faced Heglon's desk. "I do have some. Remember the Sheridan City Loan case?"

"Vaguely. Give me an outline."

"October. Five o'clock one afternoon, just as the loan office was closing. Three punks tried to knock it over. Two of them, Castrella and Kelly, are eighteen. The leader, Johnny Servius, is nineteen. Johnny is Vince Servius's kid brother.

"They went into the loan company wearing masks and waving guns. The manager had more guts than sense. He was loading the safe. He saw them and slammed the door and spun the knob. They beat on him, but he convinced them it was a time lock, which it wasn't. They took fifteen dollars out of his pants, and four dollars from the girl behind the counter and took off.

"Right across the hall is the office of an accountant named Thomas Kistner. He'd already left. His secretary, Loreen Garrity, was closing up the office. She had the door open a crack. She saw the three kids come out of the loan company, taking their masks off. Fortunately, they didn't see her.

"She went to headquarters and looked at the gallery, and picked out Servius and Castrella. They were picked up. Kelly was with them, so they took him in, too. In the lineup the Garrity girl made a positive identification of Servius and Castrella again. The manager thought he could recognize Kelly's voice.

"Bail was set high, because we expected Vince Servius would get them out. Much to everybody's surprise, he's left them in there. The only thing he did was line up George Terrafierro to defend them, which makes it tough from our point of view, but not too tough—if we could put the Gar-

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rity girl on the stand. She was the type to make a good witness. Very positive sort of girl."

"Was? Past tense?"

"This afternoon she was pushed out the window of the office where she works. Seventeen stories above the sidewalk. Gil Shinn tells me that Connie Wyant has it definitely tagged as homicide."

"If Connie says it is, then it is. What would conviction have meant to the three lads?"

"Servius had one previous conviction—car theft; Castrella had one conviction for assault with a deadly weapon. Kelly is clean, Jim."

Heglon frowned. "Odd, isn't it? In this state, armed robbery has a mandatory sentence of seven to fifteen years for a first offense in that category. With the weight Vince can swing, his kid brother would do about five years. Murder seems a little extreme as a way of avoiding a five-year sentence."

"Perhaps, Jim, the answer is in the relationship between Vince and the kid. There's quite a difference in ages. Vince must be nearly forty. He was in the big time early enough to give Johnny all the breaks. The kid has been thrown out of three good schools I know of. According to Vince, Johnny can do no wrong. Maybe that's why he left those three in jail awaiting trial—to keep them in the clear on this killing."

"It could be, Dan," Heglon said. "Go ahead with your investigation. And let me know."

Dan Fowler found out at the desk that Lieutenant Connie Wyant and Sergeant Levandowski were in the Interrogation Room. Dan sat down and waited.

After a few moments Connie waddled through the doorway and came over to him. He had bulging blue eyes and a dull expression.

Dan stood up, towering over the squat lieutenant. "Well, what's the picture, Connie?"

"No case against the kids, Gil says. Me, I wish it was just somebody thought it would be nice to jump out a window. But she grabbed the casing so hard, she broke her fingernails down to the quick.

"Marks you can see, in oak as hard as iron. Banged her head on the sill and left black hair on the rough edge of the casing. Lab matched it up. And one shoe up there, under the radiator. The radiator sits right in front of the window. Come listen to Kistner."

Dan followed him back to the Interrogation Room. Thomas Kistner sat at one side of the long table. A cigar lay dead on the glass ashtray near his elbow. As they opened the door, he glanced up quickly. He was a big, bloated man with an unhealthy grayish complexion and an important manner.

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He said, "I was just telling the sergeant the tribulations of an accountant."

"We all got troubles," Connie said. "This is Mr. Fowler from the D.A.'s office, Kistner."

Mr. Kistner got up laboriously. "Happy to meet you, sir," he said. "Sorry that it has to be such an unpleasant occasion, however."

Connie sat down heavily. "Kistner, I want you to go through your story again. If it makes it easier, tell it to Mr. Fowler instead of me. He hasn't heard it before."

"I'll do anything in my power to help, Lieutenant," Kistner said firmly. He turned toward Dan. "I am out of my office a great deal. I do accounting on a contract basis for thirty-three small retail establishments. I visit them frequently.

"When Loreen came in this morning, she seemed nervous. I asked her what the trouble was, and she said that she felt quite sure somebody had been following her for the past week.

"She described him to me. Slim, middle height, pearl-gray felt hat, tan raglan topcoat, swarthy complexion. I told her that because she was the witness in a trial coming up, she should maybe report it to the police and ask for protection. She said she didn't like the idea of yelling for help. She was a very—ah—independent sort of girl."

"I got that impression," Dan said.

"I went out then and didn't think anything more about what she'd said. I spent most of the morning at Finch Pharmacy, on the north side. I had a sandwich there and then drove back to the office, later than usual. Nearly two.

"I came up to the seventeenth floor. Going down the corridor, I pass the Men's Room before I get to my office. I unlocked the door with my key and went in. I was in there maybe three minutes.

"I came out and a man brushes by me in the corridor. He had his collar up, and was pulling down on his hatbrim and walking fast. At the moment, you understand, it meant nothing to me.

"I went into the office. The window was wide open, and the snow was blowing in. No Loreen. I couldn't figure it. I thought she'd gone to the Ladies' Room and had left the window open for some crazy reason. I started to shut it, and then I heard all the screaming down in the street.

"I leaned out. I saw her, right under me, sprawled on the sidewalk. I recognized the cocoa-colored suit. A new suit, I think. I stood in a state of shock, I guess, and then suddenly I remembered about the man following her, and I remembered the man in the hall—he had a gray

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hat and a tan topcoat, and I had the impression he was swarthy-faced.

"The first thing I did was call the police, naturally. While they were on the way, I called my wife. It just about broke her up. We were both fond of Loreen."

The big man smiled sadly. "And it seems to me I've been telling the story over and over again ever since. Oh, I don't mind, you understand. But it's a dreadful thing. The way I see it, when a person witnesses a crime, they ought to be given police protection until the trial is all over."

"We don't have that many cops," Connie said glumly. "How big was the man you saw in the corridor?"

"Medium size. A little on the thin side."

"How old?"

"I don't know. Twenty-five, forty-five. I couldn't see his face, and you understand I wasn't looking closely."

Connie turned toward Dan. "Nothing from the elevator boys about this guy. He probably took the stairs. The lobby is too busy for anybody to notice him coming through by way of the fire door. Did the Garrity girl ever lock herself in the office, Kistner?"

"I never knew of her doing that, Lieutenant."

Connie said, "Okay, so the guy could breeze in and clip her one. Then, from the way the rug was pulled up, he lugged her across to the window. She came to as he was trying to work her out the window, and she put up a battle. People in the office three stories underneath say she was screaming as she went by."

"How about the offices across the way?" Dan asked.

"It's a wide street, Dan, and they couldn't see through the snow. It started snowing hard about fifteen minutes before she was pushed out the window. I think the killer waited for that snow. It gave him a curtain to hide behind."

"Any chance that she marked the killer, Connie?" Dan asked.

"Doubt it. From the marks of her fingernails, he lifted her up and slid her feet out first, so her back was to him. She grabbed the sill on each side. Her head hit the window sash. All he had to do was hold her shoulders, and bang her in the small of the back with his knee. Once her fanny slid off the sill, she couldn't hold on with her hands any longer. And from the looks of the doorknobs, he wore gloves."

Dan turned to Kistner. "What was her home situation? I tried to question her. She was pretty evasive."

Kistner shrugged. "Big family. She didn't get along with them. Seven girls, I think, and she was next to oldest. She moved out when she got her first job. She

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lived alone in a one-room apartment on Leeds Avenue, near the bridge."

"You know of any boy friend?" Connie asked.

"Nobody special. She used to go out a lot, but nobody special."

Connie rapped his knuckles on the edge of the table. "You ever make a pass at her, Kistner?"

The room was silent. Kistner stared at his dead cigar. "I don't want to lie to you, but I don't want any trouble at home, either. I got a boy in the Army, and I got a girl in her last year of high. But you work in a small office alone with a girl like Loreen, and it can get you.

"About six months ago I had to go to the state Capital on a tax thing. I asked her to come along. She did. It was a damn fool thing to do. And it—didn't work out so good. We agreed to forget it ever happened.

"We were awkward around the office for a couple of weeks, and then I guess we sort of forgot. She was a good worker, and I was paying her well, so it was to both our advantages to be practical and not get emotional. I didn't have to tell you men this, but, like I said, I don't see any point in lying to the police. Hell, you might have found out some way, and that might make it look like I killed her or something."

"Thanks for leveling," Connie said expressionlessly. "We'll call you if we need you."

Kistner ceremoniously shook hands all around and left with obvious relief.

As soon as the door shut behind him, Connie said, "I'll buy it. A long time ago I learned you can't jail a guy for being a jerk. Funny how many honest people I meet I don't like at all, and how many thieves make good guys to knock over a beer with. How's your girl?"

Dan looked at his watch. "Dressing for dinner, and I should be, too," he said. "How are the steaks out at the Cat and Fiddle?"

Connie half closed his eyes. After a time he sighed. "Okay. That might be a good way to go at the guy. Phone me and give me the reaction if he does talk. If not, don't bother."

Jane was in holiday mood until Dan told her where they were headed. She said tartly, "I admit freely that I am a working girl. But do I get overtime for this?"

Dan said slowly, carefully, "Darling, you better understand, if you don't already, that there's one part of me I can't change. I can't shut the office door and forget the cases piled up in there. I have a nasty habit of carrying them around with me. So we go someplace else and I try like blazes to be gay, or we go to the Cat and Fiddle and get

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something off my mind."

She moved closer to him. "Dull old work horse," she said.

"Guilty."

"All right, now I'll confess," Jane said. "I was going to suggest we go out there later. I just got sore when you beat me to the draw."

He laughed, and at the next stop light he kissed her hurriedly.

The Cat and Fiddle was eight miles beyond the city line. At last Dan saw the green-and-blue neon sign, and he turned into the asphalt parking area. There were about forty other cars there.

They went from the check room into the low-ceilinged bar and lounge. The only sign of Christmas was a small silver tree on the bar; a tiny blue spot was focused on it.

They sat at the bar and ordered drinks. Several other couples were at the tables, talking in low voices. A pianist played softly in the dining room.

Dan took out a business card and wrote on it: *Only if you happen to have an opinion.*

He called the nearest bartender over. "Would you please see that Vince gets this?"

The man glanced at the name. "I'll see if Mr. Servius is in." He said something to the other bartender and left through a paneled door at the rear of the bar. He was back in less than a minute, smiling politely.

"Please go up the stairs. Mr. Servius is in his office—the second door on the right."

"I'll wait here, Dan," Jane said.

"If you are Miss Raymer, Mr. Servius would like to have you join him, too," the bartender said.

Jane looked at Dan. He nodded and she slid off the stool.

As they went up the stairs, Jane said, "I seem to be known here."

"Notorious female. I suspect he wants a witness."

Vincent Servius was standing at a small corner bar mixing himself a drink when they entered. He turned and smiled. "Fowler, Miss Raymer. Nice of you to stop by. Can I mix you something?"

Dan refused politely, and they sat down.

Vince was a compact man with cropped, prematurely white hair, a sunlamp tan, and beautifully cut clothes. He had not been directly concerned with violence in many years. In that time he had eliminated most of the traces of the hoodlum.

The over-all impression he gave was that of the up-and-coming clubman. Golf lessons, voice lessons, plastic surgery, and a good tailor—these had all helped; but nothing had been able to destroy a certain aura of alertness, ruthlessness. He was a man you would never joke with. He had made his own laws, and he carried the awareness of his own ultimate authority around with him, as un-

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mistakable as a loaded gun.

Vince went over to the fieldstone fireplace, drink in hand, and turned, resting his elbow on the mantel.

"Very clever, Fowler. 'Only if you happen to have an opinion.' I have an opinion. The kid is no good. That's my opinion. He's a cheap punk. I didn't admit that to myself until he tried to put the hook on that loan company. He was working for me at the time. I was trying to break him in here—buying foods.

"But now I'm through, Fowler. You can tell Jim Heglon that for me. Terrafierro will back it up. Ask him what I told him. I said, 'Defend the kid. Get him off if you can, and no hard feelings if you can't. If you get him off, I'm having him run out of town, out of the state. I don't want him around.' I told George that.

"Now there's this Garrity thing. It looks like I went out on a limb for the kid. Going out on limbs was yesterday, Fowler. Not today and not tomorrow. I was a sucker long enough."

He took out a crisp handkerchief and mopped his forehead. "I go right up in the air," he said. "I talk too loud."

"You can see how Heglon is thinking," Dan said quietly. "And the police, too."

"That's the hell of it. I swear I had nothing to do with it." He half smiled. "It would have helped if I'd had a tape recorder up here last month when the Garrity girl came to see what she could sell me."

Dan leaned forward. "She came here?"

"With bells on. Nothing coy about that kid. Pay off, Mr. Servius, and I'll change my identification of your brother."

"What part of last month?"

"Let me think. The tenth it was. Monday the tenth."

Jane said softly, "That's why I got the impression she wouldn't sell out, Dan. I had lunch with her later that same week. She had tried to and couldn't."

Vince took a sip of his drink. "She started with big money and worked her way down. I let her go ahead. Finally, after I'd had my laughs, I told her even one dollar was too much. I told her I wanted the kid sent up.

"She blew her top. For a couple of minutes I thought I might have to clip her to shut her up. But after a couple of drinks she quieted down. That gave me a chance to find out something that had been bothering me. It seemed too pat, kind of."

"What do you mean, Servius?" Dan asked.

"The setup was too neat, the way the door *happened* to be open a crack, and the way she *happened* to be working late, and the way she *happened* to see the kids come out.

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"I couldn't get her to admit anything at first, because she was making a little play for me, but when I convinced her I wasn't having any, she let me in on what really happened. She was hanging around waiting for the manager of that loan outfit to quit work.

"They had a system. She'd wait in the accountant's office with the light out, watching his door. Then, when the manager left, she'd wait about five minutes and leave herself. That would give him time to get his car out of the parking lot. He'd pick her up at the corner. She said he was the super-cautious, married type. They just dated once in a while. I wasn't having any of that. Too rough for me, Fowler."

There was a long silence. Dan asked, "How about friends of your brother, Servius, or friends of Kelly and Castrella?"

Vince walked over and sat down, facing them. "One—Johnny didn't have a friend who'd bring a bucket of water if he was on fire. And two—I sent the word out."

"What does that mean?"

"I like things quiet in this end of the state. I didn't want anyone helping those three punks. Everybody got the word. So who would do anything? Now both of you please tell Heglon exactly what I said. Tell him to check with Terrafierro. Tell him to have the cops check their pigeons. Ask the kid himself. I paid him a little visit. Now, if you don't mind, I've got another appointment."

They had finished their steaks before Dan was able to get any line on Connie Wyant. On the third telephone call he was given a message. Lieutenant Wyant was waiting for Mr. Fowler at 311 Leeds Street, Apartment 6A, and would Mr. Fowler please bring Miss Raymer with him.

They drove back to the city. A department car was parked in front of the building. Sergeant Levandowski was half asleep behind the wheel. "Go right in. Ground floor in the back. 6A."

Connie greeted them gravely and listened without question to Dan's report of the conversation with Vince Servius. After Dan had finished, Connie nodded casually, as though it was of little importance, and said, "Miss Raymer, I'm not so good at this, so I thought maybe you could help. There's the Garrity girl's closet. Go through it and give me an estimate on the cost."

Jane went to the open closet. She began to examine the clothes. "Hey!" she exclaimed.

"What do you think?" Connie asked.

"If this suit cost a nickel under two hundred, I'll eat it. And look at this coat. Four hundred, anyway." She bent over and picked up a shoe. "For ages I've

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dreamed of owning a pair of these. Thirty-seven fifty, at least."

"Care to make an estimate on the total?" Connie asked her.

"Gosh, thousands. I don't know. There are nine dresses in there that must have cost at least a hundred apiece. Do you have to have it accurate?"

"That's close enough, thanks." He took a small blue bankbook out of his pocket and flipped it to Dan. Dan caught it and looked inside. Loreen Garrity had more than $1100 on hand. There had been large deposits and large withdrawals—nothing small.

Connie said, "I've been to see her family. They're good people. They didn't want to talk mean about the dead, so it took a little time. But I found out our Loreen was one for the angles—a chiseler—no conscience and less morals. A rough, tough cookie to get tied up with.

"From there, I went to see the Kistners. Every time the old lady would try to answer a question, Kistner'd jump in with all four feet. I finally had to have Levandowski take him downtown just to get him out of the way. Then the old lady talked.

"She had a lot to say about how lousy business is. How they're scrimping and scraping along, and how the girl couldn't have a new formal for the Christmas dance tomorrow night at the high school gym.

"Then I called up an accountant friend after I left her. I asked him how Kistner had been doing. He cussed out Kistner and said he'd been doing fine; in fact, he had stolen some nice retail accounts out from under the other boys in the same racket. So I came over here and it looked like this was where the profit was going. So I waited for you so I could make sure."

"What can you do about it?" Dan demanded, anger in his voice, anger at the big puffy man who hadn't wanted to lie to the police.

"I've been thinking. It's eleven o'clock. He's been sitting down there sweating. I've got to get my Christmas shopping done tomorrow, and the only way I'll ever get around to it is to break him fast."

Jane had been listening, wide-eyed. "They always forget some little thing, don't they?" she asked. "Or there is something they don't know about. Like a clock that is five minutes slow, or something. I mean, in the stories . . ." Her voice trailed off uncertainly.

"Give her a badge, Connie," Dan said with amusement.

Connie rubbed his chin. "I might do that, Dan. I just might do that. Miss Raymer, you got a strong stomach? If so, maybe you get to watch your idea in operation."

It was nearly midnight, and

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Connie had left Dan and Jane alone in a small office at headquarters for nearly a half hour. He opened the door and stuck his head in. "Come on, people. Just don't say a word."

They went to the Interrogation Room. Kistner jumped up the moment they came in. Levandowski sat at the long table, looking bored.

Kistner said heatedly, "As you know, Lieutenant, I was perfectly willing to cooperate. But you are being high-handed. I demand to know why I was brought down here. I want to know why I can't phone a lawyer. You are exceeding your authority, and I—"

"Siddown!" Connie roared with all the power of his lungs.

Kistner's mouth worked silently. He sat down, shocked by the unexpected roar. A tired young man slouched in, sat at the table, flipped open a notebook, and placed three sharp pencils within easy reach.

Connie motioned Dan and Jane over toward chairs in a shadowed corner of the room. They sat side by side, and Jane held Dan's wrist, her nails sharp against his skin.

"Kistner, tell us again about how you came back to the office," Connie said.

Kistner replied in a tone of excruciating patience, as though talking to children, "I parked my car in my parking space in the lot behind the building. I used the back way into the lobby. I went up—"

"You went to the cigar counter."

"So I did! I had forgotten that. I went to the cigar counter. I bought three cigars and chatted with Barney. Then I took an elevator up."

"And talked to the elevator boy."

"I usually do. Is there a law?"

"No law, Kistner. Go on."

"And then I opened the Men's Room door with my key, and I was in there maybe three minutes. And then when I came out, the man I described brushed by me. I went to the office and found the window open. I was shutting it when I heard—"

"All this was at two o'clock, give or take a couple of minutes?"

"That's right, Lieutenant." Talking had restored Kistner's self-assurance.

Connie nodded to Levandowski. The sergeant got up lazily, walked to the door, and opened it. A burly, diffident young man came in. He wore khaki pants and a leather jacket.

"Sit down," Connie said casually. "What's your name?"

"Paul Hilbert, officer."

The tired young man was taking notes.

"What's your occupation?"

"I'm a plumber, officer. Central Plumbing, Incorporated."

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"Did you get a call today from the Associated Bank Building?"

"Well, I didn't get the call, but I was sent out on the job. I talked to the super, and he sent me up to the seventeenth floor. Sink drain clogged in the Men's Room."

"What time did you get there?"

"That's on my report, officer. Quarter after one."

"How long did it take you to finish the job?"

"About three o'clock."

"Did you leave the Men's Room at any time during that period?"

"No, I didn't."

"I suppose people tried to come in there?"

"Three or four. But I had all the water connections turned off, so I told them to go down to sixteen. The super had the door unlocked down there."

"Did you get a look at everybody who came in?"

"Sure, officer."

"You said three or four. Is one of them at this table?"

The shy young man looked around. He shook his head. "No, sir."

"Thanks, Hilbert. Wait outside. We'll want you to sign the statement when it's typed up."

Hilbert's footsteps sounded loud as he walked to the door. Everyone was watching Kistner. His face was still, and he seemed to be looking into a remote and alien future, as cold as the back of the moon.

Kistner said in a husky, barely audible voice. "A bad break. A stupid thing. Ten seconds it would have taken me to look in there. I had to establish the time. I talked to Barney. And to the elevator boy. They'd know when she fell. But I had to be some place else. Not in the office.

"You don't know how it was. She kept wanting more money. She wouldn't have anything to do with me, except when there was money. And I didn't have any more, finally.

"I guess I was crazy. I started to milk the accounts. That wasn't hard; the clients trust me. Take a little here and a little there. She found out. She wanted more and more. And that gave her a new angle. Give me more, or I'll tell.

"I thought it over. I kept thinking about her being a witness. All I had to do was make it look like she was killed to keep her from testifying. I don't care what you do to me. Now it's over, and I feel glad."

He gave Connie a long, wondering look. "Is that crazy? To feel glad it's over? Do other people feel that way?"

Connie asked Dan and Jane to wait in the small office. He came in ten minutes later; he looked tired. The plumber came in with him.

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Connie said, "Me, I hate this business. I'm after him, and I bust him, and then I start bleeding for him. What the hell? Anyway, you get your badge, Miss Raymer."

"But wouldn't you have found out about the plumber anyway?" Jane asked.

Connie grinned ruefully at her. He jerked a thumb toward the plumber. "Meet Patrolman Hilbert. Doesn't know a pipe wrench from a faucet. We just took the chance that Kistner was too eager to toss the girl out the window—so eager he didn't make a quick check of the Men's Room. If he had, he could have laughed us under the table. As it is, I can get my Christmas shopping done tomorrow. Or is it today?"

Dan and Jane left headquarters. They walked down the street, arm in arm. There was holly, and a big tree in front of the courthouse, and a car went by with a lot of people in it singing about We Three Kings of Orient Are. Kistner was a stain, fading slowly.

They walked until it was entirely Christmas Eve, and they were entirely alone in the snow that began to fall again, making tiny perfect stars of lace that lingered in her dark hair.

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a *NEW* Double-C counterspy story by

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Edward D. Hoch is probably the most prolific short-story writer on the current mystery scene. Here is the 17th in his series about Rand, the Double-C man, head of the Department of Concealed Communications . . . Would you like to read a short story so jam-packed with plot that it is almost bursting at the seams? Try this one for size . . .

THE SPY AND THE DIPLOMAT'S DAUGHTER

by EDWARD D. HOCH

SIR JOHN HEMMINGS SEEMED to have aged five years since the last time Rand had seen him, only a few months earlier. He'd come up to London after a few days at his weekend cottage on the Devonshire moors, and had immediately summoned Rand from his office at Concealed Communications. Now, seated behind his massive oak desk in the Foreign Office, Sir John seemed to find it his only shelter from some unmentionable disaster.

"I especially asked for you, Rand, because y o u ' v e met Cecily." He paused to pass a hand over his bloodshot eyes. "Remember? You met her at my home a few years back, and I believe you spoke to her again on the day of my wife's funeral earlier this year."

Rand nodded agreement. "I'd heard that your daughter was back from abroad, Sir John."

"That's just the trouble! She graduated from that fancy school in June and then dropped out of sight in Paris. I didn't hear from her all summer. She returned home two months ago, at the end of August." He hesitated, then hurried on. "Rand, these last two months have been pure hell for me!"

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"What's the trouble? Your daughter?"

"Rand, I don't think the girl living in my house *is* my daughter. I think she's an impostor!"

"But surely you must know your own daughter, Sir John!"

He was a beaten man, close to collapse. "She's nineteen now, Rand. She's been away at school in Paris since she was fifteen. I saw her only summers and holidays, and even then she was always closer to her mother. I was traveling, attending conferences, filling the diplomat's role."

"You must have some concrete reason for your suspicions."

"She's—well, not quite right. She seems to have forgotten things, Rand. I've spoken to my sister Rita about it, and she's noticed it too. Why, Cecily didn't even remember the name of Rita's cat, Skipper."

"But you said yourself she's been living abroad for four years. It would be natural for her to forget some things about her family, especially after the shock of her mother's death."

"But there are other things," Sir John Hemmings continued. "Cecily was always interested in continuing her studies here in London at the Royal Academy or the Drama League. Now she seems to have lost all interest in that. Besides which, she's much thinner now and her hair is shorter. Damn it, I just don't think she's my daughter Cecily!"

"What would be the reason for an impersonation? Did her mother leave Cecily a large inheritance?"

"Nothing like that. But I do a good deal of work at home — diplomatic correspondence, conference reports, highly confidential things I don't trust to this office. Even my assistant, Churchwood, doesn't know the agenda for the forthcoming Paris talks, or my instructions for the Middle East meetings. And last week at home I caught Cecily—or whoever she is—going through my brief case."

"What excuse did she give?"

"That she was looking for a match! I never carry matches in my brief case. After that I started intercepting her letters to Scotland."

"Letters?"

Sir John Hemmings opened a folder and passed a batch of Xerox copies over to Rand. They were handwritten letters, addressed to someone named Henry, and filled with rambling thoughts about love, truth, and beauty. There were also attempts at poetry, but they were mostly collections of disjointed words which made no sense at all. "I think those poems contain secret messages of some sort," Sir John said quietly.

Rand grunted and asked, "Who are the letters addressed to?"

"A fellow named Henry White.

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I asked her about him and she says she knew him in Paris. He's back home in Edinburgh now."

Rand slipped the copies into his inner pocket. As head of the Department of Concealed Communications he had a staff that could quickly find any messages that might be lurking there. But he couldn't help wondering if Sir John wasn't exaggerating the entire problem. Secret messages in a girl's love letters, a girl who pretended to be his daughter—it all seemed hard for Rand to swallow. Still—

"All right," he told Sir John. "I'll go down to your place and speak with Cecily—or whoever she is. Meanwhile I'll put Parkinson, the best man I have in Double-C, to work on these letters. I think I should talk to your sister, too."

Sir John Hemmings nodded. "And to a chap named Scott Freesman. Cecily dated him last summer and they were almost engaged. After her return this past August she saw him just once and now refuses to go out with him. More evidence that this girl in my house is an impostor!"

"Perhaps," Rand said. "We'll look into it, Sir John."

As he was leaving the office he saw Hemmings' assistant, Churchwood, watching him with interest. But the little man said nothing, and Rand merely nodded as he went out.

Sir John Hemmings had served as an important cog in the machinery of the British Foreign Office for nearly two decades. He was a man totally committed to his diplomatic duties, and Rand was not surprised that this had led to neglect of his fatherly duties.

Home to Sir John and his daughter was a big old townhouse near Kensington Gardens. It was a pleasant house, with a large living room for entertaining and a comfortable book-lined library for meditation. It was here that Cecily Hemmings awaited him, curled up in a leather armchair with a book. She looked up as the housekeeper showed him in, smiled, and rose to greet him.

"It's good to see you again, Mr. Rand," she said, extending a soft white hand. "Father phoned to say you'd be stopping by."

She was much thinner than Rand remembered her, but still a striking young lady. Her dark hair was cut shorter, and her smile was not so quick, but he would have bet a good amount that this was the real Cecily Hemmings. Older, more poised, but certainly the same girl. Then she stared directly at him and asked, "How is your wife?"

Rand never even blinked, though he could feel a chill on his spine. "I'm not married," he said. "You must be confusing me with someone else."

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"Of course! How stupid of me. Do sit down."

"Your father's been very worried about you, Cecily. You gave him a bad scare this summer when you dropped out of sight in Paris."

"I know. I suppose mother's death just made me run away. I had to find myself." She tossed her head in a gesture that might have been youthful defiance.

"And did you?"

"I think so."

He could see that he would get nowhere. He belonged to a different generation, and there was no longer any common meeting ground for them, if there ever had been. Now, trying to talk to her, he began to experience the same doubts that her father was feeling.

"I'm surprised to find that the little girl I used to know is gone."

"I'm sorry." She tried to smile. "I guess she grew up."

"I have to leave now," he said. "Perhaps we can talk again."

Her eyes caught his, then looked quickly away. Something *was* wrong, but Rand could not put his finger on it. "Was there something father wanted you to ask me?" she said.

"He's worried about you. He says you don't seem . . . yourself."

"How would he know? Until mother died he hardly noticed me. He was too busy being out of the country."

"Your father holds a very high diplomatic post, Cecily."

"I know. He's told me."

"Did you run away simply to get his attention?"

"I ran away because—" But the housekeeper interrupted.

"Mr. Freesman is on the phone, Miss Cecily."

She froze in the chair. "Tell him I'm not at home."

The housekeeper left and Rand edged toward the door. There was a chill in the room, an October chill that went deep to the bone. "Scott Freesman is a nice chap," Rand commented. "Why have you stopped seeing him?"

"Father tells you everything, doesn't he?"

"Why, Cecily?"

She turned away. "I'm a different person than when I went with Scott."

"A different person?"

She turned suddenly. "A figure of speech. I meant I've grown up, found new interests."

"I see. Well, I'll be going." He paused at the door and asked one more question. "What's the book you were reading when I arrived?"

She shrugged down at the volume on the table. "Just an old spy novel by E. Phillips Oppenheim. *The Great Impersonation,* it's called."

Rand had met Sir John Hemmings' sister only once, at a

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diplomatic dinner he'd attended. Her name was Rita, but to everyone at the dinner she had been Aunt Rita. A humorless woman, a bit overweight and beginning to look like a dowager, Rita Hemmings had never married. Since the death of Sir John's wife she had taken a maternal interest in Cecily's upbringing and in her brother's future. Now, facing Rand in the sitting room of her cluttered Chelsea apartment, she seemed visibly upset.

"If my brother saw fit to consult you, Mr. Rand, the situation must indeed be serious. I know these last two months have been the most difficult of his life."

A large white cat was prowling across the floor. This, Rand thought, must be Skipper. "Difficult in what way, Miss Hemmings? You can't really believe the girl is an impostor."

"Here, Skipper!" she called. The cat glanced up, ignored her, and scurried under a chair. "I don't know what to think, Mr. Rand. She didn't know Skipper's name, she forgot that roses were my favorite flower—little things, I admit. And she has certain mannerisms that are completely unfamiliar."

"Surely a father would know his own daughter?"

"Perhaps this father wouldn't. Sir John has been preoccupied with his career for many years. He's very active in the Common Market negotiations, and also in the Middle East peace talks."

"And you really think some foreign power would try to substitute a spy for his daughter?"

"She sees him working on top-security matters at home."

Rand shook his head. "What about the fellow she used to go with—Scott Freesman?"

"Well, the fact that she's dropped him since her return is one more piece of evidence, isn't it? A boy friend, especially one who might have been very close to her, would be the last one to be deceived."

"And were they very close?" Rand asked.

"I'm not sure—but it would explain the way she's acting."

He nodded. "I think it's time I spoke with young Mr. Freesman. Thank you, Miss Hemmings. It's been a pleasure."

She got up and saw him to the door. The cat named Skipper ran along at her side.

It took Rand half of the chilly October afternoon to locate Scott Freesman. He was a young man in his early twenties with sideburns and a neatly trimmed mustache. As a civil engineer employed by the government, his work took him to obscure parts of the city, and it was at a construction project on the Thames that Rand finally found him.

"I'm a friend of Cecily's

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father," Rand explained, introducing himself.

The young man frowned. "I haven't seen Cecily in three weeks. Is anything wrong?"

"That's what we're trying to find out." Rand took him by the arm and guided him away from the others. Before them, the river was dark and threatening, like the autumn sky. "I understand you've seen her only once since her return."

"That's right. She seems to have other interests now."

"Is there any chance—any possibility at all—that the girl who returned is not Cecily Hemmings but an impostor?"

Young Freesman looked at Rand with a puzzled frown. After a moment he replied, "That's a crazy idea. Of course it's Cecily!"

"You're sure?"

"Who's questioning it?"

"Her father, for one. Her aunt, for another."

"They just haven't seen her for almost a year, that's all! Of course it's Cecily!"

"You have no doubt?"

"None whatsoever," he answered confidently.

Rand found an unaccountable sense of relief flowing through him. "I'm glad to hear that. I hope it will settle some of her father's fears."

"If there's anything I can do, please call me. I still think a great deal of Cecily."

"I'll remember," Rand said. "Thanks for your help."

He was humming a snatch of Gilbert and Sullivan as he drove back to his office at Concealed Communications. He'd talked to Hemmings, Cecily, Aunt Rita, and Freesman, and come up with nothing to prove the girl wasn't who she claimed to be. There was no 19-year-old spy masquerading as a diplomat's daughter.

Parkinson was waiting in his office with a file of reports. Rand glanced at his mail, then asked, "Anything urgent?"

"The boys worked over those letters from Sir John's daughter," Parkinson replied.

Rand grunted, skimming through a memo from Operations. "Nothing there, of course."

"On the contrary. We found messages hidden in each of the love poems. A simple dictionary code, really. There's no doubt the girl is a spy."

Rand put down the memo and just stared at him.

There was no possibility of error. Each letter contained a long rambling poem—usually only a collection of random words. At a quick glance they seemed to be merely the love poems of an adolescent girl who'd read too many of the new young poets. But by locating the words in the Oxford Dictionary and then

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counting down the number of words equivalent to the date of the letter, a message took shape. Thus, in the letter dated October 15th, the word *trash* became *travel.*

Rand read over the resulting messages with a sinking feeling. *John plans travel to secret middle east meeting on November seven.* And another: *John instructed by prime minister to seek best terms at Paris meeting. Nothing below fifteen percent acceptable.* There were more of the same, dealing with Arabian oil interests and relations with Cairo. Rand read them all through twice.

"All right," he said to Parkinson. "You've convinced me."

"Going to tell Sir John?"

Rand sighed. "I suppose I have to. I was so certain he was wrong in his suspicions!" He looked down at the decoded messages again. "How'd you get onto it?"

"The first word in each poem starts with a J. That seemed too much of a coincidence—words like *jocular* and *jockey* and *job.* I looked them up in the Oxford and started counting. When I realized that by counting down the number of words indicated by the letter's date I always came to *John,* the rest was easy."

"Check the address in Scotland where they were sent. What's the fellow's name?"

"Henry White."

"Let me know as soon as you have anything more."

When Parkinson had left, Rand telephoned Sir John's office. His secretary said he'd gone home early. Rand debated a moment, then phoned Sir John's home. Cecily answered and Rand hung up without speaking. He didn't want to scare her away. Sir John could be told in the morning.

But when morning came he found the situation had changed. Sir John called him, his voice cracking. "Rand, she's disappeared! Run away!"

"Cecily?"

"Or the girl who calls herself Cecily."

"Did she leave any message?"

"None. But I learned she received a telegram from Edinburgh yesterday. It was unsigned, but it must have been from that White fellow. I got a copy of it from the telegraph office."

"What does it say?"

"Just *Room 92 Rebot Co.* R-e-b-o-t. Company abbreviated. And that's all!"

"Room 92 Rebot Co.," Rand repeated, jotting it down. "I'll put my men on it right away. Meantime, check with your sister on the off chance she's heard something."

"I already did," Sir John said curtly. "And I telephoned young Freesman, too. Neither has heard anything from her."

Rand hesitated, then said, "I think I should tell you, Sir John,

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that you were correct about the letters. They do contain coded messages concerning your travel plans and other activities."

"Then at least I know she isn't my daughter!"

Rand said nothing in reply.

"Will you alert the police and British Intelligence, Rand? She must be trying to leave the country."

"We'll do what we can, Sir John. I'll keep in touch." He hung up and tried to puzzle out this latest development. Finally he summoned Parkinson to his office and handed him the message.

"I want you to check industrial directories and see if you can locate any Rebot Co. Our best bets are London and Edinburgh, though it could be anywhere. If there's nothing in Great Britain, check France and the United States and anywhere else you can think of."

"Right, sir."

"Put someone else to work on telephone books, and have the phone company itself checked in case it's a new or private listing."

"We'll get right on it."

Parkinson was almost to the door when Rand asked, "And what about this Henry White—the Scottish lover?"

"It's simply a mail drop. An old lady running a boarding house. A man pays her ten pounds a month to hold the mail until he picks it up. We're having the place watched, but he may not come back now if the girl's making her getaway."

Rand nodded. "And you'd better keep M.I. 5 informed." He knew from past experience that the other intelligence and security agencies sometimes resented a lead taken by Double-C.

Alone, he walked to the window and stared out at the muddy Thames. The girl was certainly a spy, and she was certainly gone. But at this point he did not want to speculate any further.

By evening they had the bad news. There was no Rebot Co., and there was no Rebot Building which might contain a Room 92. Not in London or Edinburgh or any other likely place. Parkinson had gone back to the Oxford Dictionary, but Rebot was not even a word. Finally, in desperation, Rand got in touch with the telegraph company for a copy of the message that Cecily had received from Edinburgh. There was no mistake. It read: Room 92 Rebot Co.

Worse, there was no sign of Cecily or of the mysterious Henry White of Edinburgh. It seemed obvious they were converging on a meeting place, and that place was most likely somewhere in England. But where?

Room 92 Rebot Co.

At seven o'clock Rand had a thought. "Suppose Co. doesn't

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stand for Company at all, but for County?"

"Room 92 Rebot County? It doesn't make sense."

"Nevertheless, Parkinson, get an atlas. It just might be what we're looking for."

But there was no Rebot County listed anywhere in the world. It was another dead end. Rand sighed and put on his raincoat.

"Going home, sir?"

"No. I'm going to see Sir John."

The house near Kensington Gardens was quiet when he reached it, and the street was dark. He was surprised to see Rita Hemmings open the door, and more surprised when she held a finger to her lips. "My brother is resting," she whispered. "This has been a very trying time."

"No word from Cecily?"

"None. John said you confirmed that her letters contained secret messages."

Rand nodded.

There was a noise from the library and Sir John himself appeared in the doorway. He seemed even more drawn and tired than before. "Hello, Rand. Anything new?"

"Nothing."

"The telegram?"

"We're working on it."

The diplomat passed a hand over his eyes. "These are difficult days."

"They might grow more difficult," Rand said carefully.

Sir John and his sister stared at him. "What do you mean by that?"

"I think we have to face the possibility that the girl really *is* your daughter, Sir John."

"But—but—"

"She is a spy, she is transmitting classified information about your activities. But that doesn't prove she's not your daughter. Cecily has lived abroad during her important formative years. She might very well have fallen under the influence of foreign agents."

"I don't believe it!" Rita Hemmings insisted. "Not Cecily—not the *real* Cecily!"

"We have to face the possibility," Rand repeated. Then, "While I'm here I'd like to go through her room, if I may. There could be some clue to her whereabouts."

"Certainly," Sir John said. "This way."

But the room held only the usual possessions of a 19-year-old girl. There were no secret-code books or bottles of invisible ink, though Rand noted a well-thumbed Oxford Dictionary on her writing table. He glanced through a little address book, but there was no listing of a Rebot Co. The closet was equally unprofitable—only some sweaters and a few miniskirts.

"She took a suitcase and several outfits," Sir John explain-

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ed. "It doesn't seem as if she's planning to come back soon."

Rand grunted and shut the closet door. There was nowhere else to look. He stood in the center of the room, staring at a scenic calendar on one wall.

That was when it came to him. Simple, so simple. "It's backwards!" he told them.

"What?" Sir John asked, looking around.

"The telegram! Don't you see—Room 92 Rebot Co. It's the simplest sort of coded message—so simple I didn't see it till just now, looking at that calendar. You just read it backwards and it becomes October 29 Moor."

"The 29th is tomorrow!" Rita Hemmings said.

Rand nodded. "And I believe you have a cottage on the Devonshire moors, Sir John?"

"Of course! Do you think she could be there?"

"I'm certain of it. The backwards telegram was obviously a spur-of-the-moment thing, done without advance planning. Our Scottish friend Henry White needed a message that Cecily would grasp and act upon at once—something less complex than the dictionary code. So the meeting place also had to be something simple that she'd know without long explanation. *Moor* can only mean your Devonshire cottage, Sir John."

"Come on!" Sir John decided instantly. "It's a five-hour drive, but if we leave now we can be there before dawn."

"If you're going so am I," Aunt Rita said firmly.

"We'll all go," Rand agreed. "I'll phone my office and tell them to alert the local police units." But while he was phoning, another thought occurred to him, and he made two additional calls.

Driving through the darkened countryside, over dimly lit roads, Rand could almost imagine himself on a journey back through history. They crossed the Salisbury Plain, just south of Stonehenge, passed close to Shaftesbury, Wellington, and the Blackdown Hills. When at last the bleak flatlands of the Devonshire moors were visible by the first light of dawn, he almost imagined he could see the fabled Hound of the Baskervilles running along the horizon.

"Turn here," Sir John said, indicating a dirt road that led to the right. He'd been silent, dozing or meditating, during most of the trip, but now he seemed fresher than Rand.

In the distance they could make out the cottage, a low rambling structure surrounded by undershrubs. Rand saw two cars parked outside, and felt his pulse quicken. "You two stay in the car," he said. "I'll go in alone."

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"It's my daughter," Sir John said softly. "I'm going—too."

"Very well. Miss Hemmings, stay here and keep an eye out for the police."

Rand and Sir John walked quickly through the chill dawn mists to the front door. The diplomat paused only long enough to glance at the little car in the drive. "Where did she get that, I wonder?"

Rand looked inside the car. "It's rented. And judging from the license plate the other one's from Scotland. We are about to meet the mysterious Mr. Henry White."

Sir John used his key and the cottage door swung open. With luck they would be asleep, Rand hoped, but still he wished he'd had time to requisition a gun.

At first the cottage seemed deserted. It was a full minute before a tall blond man whom Rand had never seen before stepped out of the kitchen holding a pistol.

"What's the meaning of this?" Sir John exploded. "Where is my daughter?"

The girl they knew as Cecily came into view then, standing next to the blond man. Her face was contorted into something like rage. "You had to come here, didn't you?" she screamed at them. "You had to follow me here and try to stop us!"

"What have you done with my daughter?" Sir John demanded, taking a step forward.

The pistol came up an inch and was ominously steady, pointed at Sir John's chest. Rand held his breath.

"Your daughter's dead," the blond man said, speaking with a trace of Scottish accent. "And now I'm afraid you will be joining her. You know too much about our little scheme."

"Just a minute," Rand said, stepping directly into the line of fire. "That won't do you any good, Mr. White. The police are outside."

"You know my name?"

"The name you've been using for your mail drop in Scotland—Henry White. Your real name isn't important to me now. I know you killed the real Cecily Hemmings somewhere in Europe and substituted this girl in her place. I know she's been sending you secret messages in love poems, detailing Sir John's plans for the Middle East talks and the Paris negotiations."

"Who are you?" White asked.

"He's Rand," the girl answered. "The one I told you about."

Rand took a careful step forward. Sir John was now behind him, out of the line of fire. "I'm coming after the gun, White. You'd better give it to me."

The blond man's lip curled in contempt. Rand saw his finger whiten on the trigger. Then sud-

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denly the girl shoved him to one side, and Rand dived for the gun hand. The pistol jerked sideways and fired once, shattering a window across the room. Rand's fist came up and the Scotsman toppled to the floor. Then the room was filling with police and Aunt Rita was screaming and Sir John was looking bewildered.

"That was the bravest thing I ever saw, Rand," the diplomat said. "You'd have been dead if the girl hadn't pushed his arm!"

Rand managed a smile. "I was counting on her doing just that. You see, Sir John, this young lady really is your daughter Cecily."

The police had taken White away, and Cecily had settled down with her father's arms protectively around her. Aunt Rita was busy preparing tea, and Rand was making notes for his report. It had been a long night, and he was suddenly sleepy.

"How did it all happen, Cecily?" her father wanted to know. "You're safe. You can tell us now."

"I'd like to hear some of the details myself," Rand admitted.

Cecily lifted her head from her father's shoulder. "It's a long involved story, with some very unpleasant details along the way. Let's just say I fell in with a bad crowd after graduation. With my mother dead there didn't seem much to come home to. I'm sorry, Daddy, but that's the way it was—you just were never around. Anyway, one night I met a new crowd at a party, and I decided that Cecily Hemmings belonged to the past."

Rand nodded. "You were always something of an actress."

"Well," she went on, "this new life was fine for a time. I'd cut all contacts with Daddy and Aunt Rita, and I was on my own at last. Then one day I discovered the new crowd was part of an international spy ring supplying information to the highest bidder. It was just after all the trouble with the West German officials who committed suicide. That shut off some of their best sources of information, and they were looking around for another Western capital in which to plant agents. That was when I heard of their plan to assassinate my father."

"What!" Sir John exclaimed.

"That's right, Daddy. They were going to kill you. They had it all planned. The man who would probably be elevated to your job was one of their agents."

Sir John frowned. "Not Churchwood?"

"Yes, Churchwood. They wanted him in your job. And you can understand the spot that put me in. I couldn't reveal my own identity, and I feared for your life, even if I found a way to warn you. But I had another idea.

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Henry White was on the scene by then, heading up the operation, and I told him the most fantastic lie I could imagine. I told him I had once been mistaken for Cecily Hemmings at school, that I looked a good deal like her."

"My God!" her father breathed.

"It was the only thing I could think of. Henry was interested right away, and he said I should come to Paris with him the following week to meet somebody. He said he wanted to test whether or not I could really pass as Sir John Hemmings' daughter. I went with him, because by that time I was in too deeply. That night in Paris was almost the worst of my life. He took me to meet—"

"Scott Freesman," Rand interrupted.

"Yes—but how could you know?"

"If you were the real Cecily Hemmings you had nothing to fear from Scott, yet you stopped dating him, and saw him only once after your return. You weren't afraid he'd discover you were an impostor—you were afraid he'd discover you *weren't* an impostor. Therefore, Scott had to be involved in the plot."

"He was, all right. I'd lost quite a lot of weight since he saw me at mother's funeral last winter, and when he walked into that Paris hotel room he stared at me and said, 'She's almost perfect.' I guess that night was when I did my best acting. I'd changed my hair style and that was what seemed to bother him most. He told me how Cecily wore it, and even produced an old snapshot of me from his wallet. They spent the rest of the night talking over the scheme, instructing me with all the information Scott could remember about my house and family. He knew I'd never been close to my father, and with my mother dead he was certain the plan would work."

"I just can't believe it," Sir John said. "But, Rand, how did you know?"

Rand took a sip of tea before replying. He was very tired. "There were several clues. I knew Cecily had acting ability, which made the whole thing possible in the first place. You were convinced the girl was not your daughter, and that left only two possibilities—either she was an impostor, or she was the real Cecily *acting* like an impostor. But an impostor would hardly have greeted me reading a copy of *The Great Impersonation*. She'd hardly have risked asking me about my wife without knowing whether or not I was married. But the *real* Cecily would have done just that, especially with the book. Remember the plot of that old Oppenheim novel? It was about a man who returns to England *impersonating himself*—the exact part in which Cecily found herself. It was her

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subtle way of telling me the truth."

"And Freesman?"

"Cecily stopped seeing him, and that was my first clue to his involvement. Once I'd decided she was pretending to be an impostor, I had to ask myself why. She could have acted completely normal and still sent the messages to White in Scotland. Or she could have told you the whole truth, Sir John. The only reason I could think of for her acting the way she did was if someone close to the family was in league with White and the enemy. That would also explain how the gang thought they could properly instruct an impostor to take Cecily's place and be confident she could get away with it. It had to be someone Cecily knew well, and yet—since she knew she was *not* an impostor—I felt she wouldn't want much contact with the person. Scott Freesman fitted the bill."

Cecily nodded. "I saw him once, but I was afraid he'd realize the truth. I told him I thought it wiser if we avoided each other."

"Of course Freesman was the only one who said it was the real Cecily—another point against him. But when the telegram came and I knew something had scared them off, I was sure it was my questioning of Freesman that had caused the panic. He must have suggested this cottage as a meeting place, and of course he was planning to be here too."

Cecily nodded. "I'd convinced them the real Cecily had been drowned in the Seine. She'd disappeared, of course, and there was a convenient suicide at just that time. They believed it—despondency over her mother's death, you know. But Scott was always afraid she might turn up again. Your questioning really panicked him, and he phoned White to hold a meeting. Of course I'd wanted Daddy to become suspicious just as he did, and to get someone like you into it, Mr. Rand. I had to play my part until I could betray them without endangering Daddy. That was why I was so upset when I saw he'd come here to the cottage. All my work to keep him safe, and here he was facing a gun after all."

Rand smiled. "I knew you wouldn't let White shoot. I bet my life on it."

"What about Freesman?" Sir John asked. "Where is he?"

"I checked the telephone records after Cecily ran away," Rand told them. "When I found out that he'd called Edinburgh just after I questioned him, it was all the proof I needed. I had him arrested before we left London last night. I think we can now pick up Churchwood at the Foreign Office, Sir John, and we'll have them all." He smiled bleakly. "And then I can get some sleep."

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two for the

DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

In so many ways a "second story" is even more important than a "first story." It means that the new author hasn't rested on his or her laurels; it means the new author is continuing to write—persisting, persevering, producing . . .

Kathryn Gottlieb's first story, "An Extremely Civilized Murder," appeared in the March 1966 issue of EQMM. Now, nearly five years later, we give you her second story—and we have a strong hunch we won't have to wait that long for her third. "The Gun" is a sensitive and perceptive love story—yes, we said "love story"; and yet, as you will see, it belongs in a mystery-suspense magazine. It is "extremely civilized"—a compulsive story that makes compulsive reading . . .

THE GUN

by KATHRYN GOTTLIEB

I WAS SWEATING. THE MONTH was July, the city was New York, the air conditioner in the office of the Consulate of the African Republic of Matanzia was noisy and blew hot air at me, and the news was bad. "They've held back the cash," said Joseph Arundu. "You'll have to forget the job." He shook his head. "I regret it exceedingly."

"You regret it!"

He looked at me gravely from the far side of the mahogany desk. "We do, you know. We need you."

"Oh, look, what the hell—I mean, I'm sorry, forgive me, but what am I supposed to do? On the basis of our contract I terminated my job, I gave up my lease." I was trying to keep the anger out of my voice, which left the whine in. "I gave up my women," I said, lightening it. I wanted the job badly. I am a

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civil engineer, the job was water resources development, I liked Arundu and the others of his countrymen I had talked to some months before, and I wanted to go to Africa. I had been looking forward to it the way one looks forward to a new life. "What do you want me to do?"

Arundu was a big man, handsome and somber. He was wearing a white robe of some kind and a small Nehru-type hat with bits of mirror glass set in around the edge. Outside of that he was just like you and me, only more interesting.

"Wait for us," he said. "In three months we'll have the funds to get started. I'm sure of it. The Bank has promised." He shook his head and looked at me with a small smile. "It is only at the last minute that the Bank advised us of the delay. Red tape. Red tape! You have this also in your country? Look." He leaned forward confidentially. "Do you want me to settle your contract?" He looked me sturdily in the eye. "We're broke. I can offer you a lifetime supply of coconuts."

Go fight City Hall. "I'll wait," I said. "I'll wait."

And that was the beginning. If the International Bank for Development had come through with the cash on schedule, I wouldn't be writing now from this place of confinement.

I'd said I'd wait, but meanwhile I had to live. I called my old friend Tom Stanley who is president of a small upstate outfit called Paleotronics. Tom said he could fit me into a temporary slot in Engineering and so I shortly found myself up in Elsinore, a small town 40 miles west of Albany, New York, and a long way from Africa—but now, in July, just as hot.

Elsinore is the kind of town where if you want to stay overnight you have to buy a house; so Tom and his wife Jane made room for me in their own split-level for a week and then Jane found me a place of my own, primitive quarters in the gatehouse of a boarded-up estate just outside of town, northwest of the plant. There I lived happily on delicatessen, reading Joseph Conrad, stayed away from the Stanleys. I saw no one else, formed no ties, worked some evenings on stuff I brought back from the office—they were busy there at Paleotronics, expanding into bankruptcy—and wandered in the summer nights through the rankly overgrown and scented garden and thought of Africa.

So far so good.

One night—I had worked late, it was after seven—I stopped at Pete's Delicatessen, bought a half pound of ham, two rolls, and a six-pack, put the package on the car seat, then sat there with the car keys in my hand, watching

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the late July sunlight blasting down Main Street which runs west and uphill at that point, and watching, listening to and inhaling the traffic which is heavy—there's a lot of trucking along this route. I was tired. Hot, tired, bored, edgy, worried, and critical.

I watched the poor skinny high-school girls and their poor skinny little mothers walking down the street, with their life-like faces, and then I scowled at a car that pulled into the space ahead of me. I disapprove of sloppy driving, and this car stopped well short of the curb, its tail sticking out into traffic just enough to annoy. The driver, a woman, got out slowly, no hurry, and walked over to the parking meter, a straight-backed, idle walk with a lot of don't-care in it.

My first sight of Kay Bannerman. I watched her with idle dislike. She was tall, looked about 27, and cared little for the opinion of humanity, being washed but not, I think, combed—her hair, a kind of dull brownish-gold, was yanked back from her face and held by a barrette at the nape of her neck. She was wearing a limp garment made in two pieces that failed to meet in the middle, washed out and worn out; she needed starch, or embroidery, or a collar and tie.

I stared at her as she fumbled in her purse for a coin to put in the meter. She had a firm profile, high cheekbones, and a human-looking mouth. She wasn't wearing any makeup. She caught my glance and looked at me with hatred. She was beautiful. She gave up on the coin hunt and sauntered away from the meter. Violation, it said.

I watched until the screen door of the delicatessen, s l a m m i n g behind her, made her invisible. The sun was hot, the fumes were shortening my life, and the noise offended my ears. I drove home. The ham was sweating and the beer was warm. I kept thinking of her. I did not know at the time either her name or what it was she had against the world.

I soon enough found out both.

The Stanleys gave a cocktail party. There must have been 40 people jammed into the little recreation room that I had slept in that first week. I was in a friendly mood, glad to see people for a change. I hadn't really seen anyone to talk to outside the Paleotronics office and I hadn't heard a word from the Africans. I was beginning to worry and I was glad of the distraction. I got there pretty much on time and found the place already jammed with the prompt.

I had a couple of drinks and talked to various people and then through a momentary clearing in the crowd I saw a tall girl standing at the end of the room. She was alone. Her back was to the rest

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of us and she was staring at a picture on the wall. I had a vision of sweated ham and blinding sun that came and went like an aberration before I recognized the back in the black dress. Under that dress was the thin white waist I know so well that dwelled between the top and bottom of that unspeakable two-piece.

I elbowed my way across the room saying sorry, sorry, and when I got near her I saw that the hair was piled on top of her head this time and held in a sort of French knot by, I think, the same barrette. The hair was the dark gold I remembered and strands had come unfastened or had never been fastened and were straggling down the back of a really beautiful neck. I came up even with her and she never looked around at me until I said hello.

Then her eyes looked right at mine. They were a dark shade of blue and set in deep, nicely spaced sockets. She had a somber expression that reminded me of Joseph Arundu's. A lot of people are finding the world heavy going these days.

She spoke. "You," she said.

I acknowledged it. Would she like a drink?

She would.

I plowed my way to the bar and back again and we drank our drinks together. People left a little space around us.

"Tell me," she said. She looked amused. "Where you come from, are there women?"

"Cleveland. Yes."

"Delicatessens?"

"The world's best. Why?"

"Then how is it you never saw a woman walk into a delicatessen before?"

"I stared at you," I said. I felt the color come up in my face. "If you don't want to be looked at, then don't go out like that."

The faint smile faded. "Like what?"

"That thing you were wearing," I said. "That garment. Like the things you see flapping on lines in people's yards on country roads when you're driving by at high speed. It forces people to look at you. It—" (I was groping for words, or for a thought) "it forces intimacy. And don't go around with hair straggling down your neck."

Her hand went up to smooth back her hair and my stomach gave a lurch. She was wearing a wedding band. I'm not a poacher. But now it was too late.

She saw the movement of my eyes. "Dead," she said. "He's dead. Lying in the cold cold ground."

"That's not nice," I said. "To talk like that."

"You wanted to know." And then—"I'm going. I have to go home." She looked around, stooped, and put her glass down on the floor next to the wall out

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of the way because there was no other place and then she was forcing her way out through the people who were looking at her oddly and I stood there saying to myself: let it end, let it end now; and then I found myself walking down the room after her and it took time because the people had come together in her wake and when I got to the end of the room she was walking out the door.

"Don't go," I called after her. I didn't even know her name. Behind me someone tittered. A knot of people came between us and when I got to the door she was gone. I stood outside on the flat stone step. The night was warm and the air was moving softly. Out on the street a motor was spinning and not catching. The battery had run down. I didn't want a woman. I didn't want to want a woman. I didn't want to care about anyone. This was not the time in my life for it, for ties and bondage, for the Tom-and-Jane life, for the nine-to-five. *After* Africa.

Silence in the street. Then she came walking back over the lawn. When she came up to me I caught her wrist. She said, "I think I must have left the radio on."

"I'll take you home."

She looked dismayed. "You mustn't leave the party. You mustn't leave here with me."

"The party's all right. I'll come back and say goodnight. Come on."

"But my car—"

"I'll call a garage. Don't worry. All right?"

She told me her name was Kay Bannerman, and where she lived.

Her house was out in the same direction as mine, but not so far. It was an oldfashioned-looking place, almost a mile beyond the last split-level and with fallow fields on either side of it; waiting for the developers, growing weeds and money. I turned off the engine and we listened to the summer evening. The tree frogs were making a lot of sound. I leaned back against the window at my left and looked at her. She stared straight ahead. Her profile was beautiful and strong, her expression vulnerable and sad.

After a long time I got out of the car and went around and opened the door on her side. She got out and stood facing me. The street light was shining on her face. She was very beautiful, like Ingrid Bergman on the late-late TV movies. I wanted to touch her face in the lamplight, but I folded my arms. "Look," I said, "I'm going to Africa."

"Don't be angry," she said. She was smiling faintly. "I'm not going to stop you." She turned away from me and went up the path to her front door. I stood where I was and watched until she opened her door and I saw a

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light go on behind it as it closed.

I went back to the Stanleys' and said good night and thank you. I picked up a lot of sideways looks there, including one from my host. I went back to the gatehouse and spent a sleepless night, my haven destroyed. At three in the morning I turned on the light and picked up Mr. Conrad's book, since that gentleman spoke to my condition.

The next morning at Paleotronics, George Russell who had been at the Stanleys' party stopped at my desk, s m i l e d unpleasantly, and passed o n without comment. Russell is a man with transparent red hair and a badly assembled face—he has thin lips that don't appear to meet at the corners, and yet they must.

I left promptly at five and drove directly to her house. As I drew near, looking across the open fields I saw her working in the garden beyond. Even at that distance I had no doubt it was Kay; she was dressed in coveralls and her hair was tucked up under a railroad cap, but her bearing was distinctive. She was picking something and putting it in a basket. I drove up the weed-grown driveway, stopped behind the house, and got out. She turned and came up to me, not hurrying. The vegetable patch was a good distance behind the house, maybe 300 feet. She was carrying a small basket of tomatoes under one arm and holding onto a bunch of rooted cuttings of some kind. Chrysanthemums. A sharp end-of-summer smell wafted off them.

"Come onto the porch," she said. She sounded as though she had expected to see me there.

We sat on the wooden steps leading up from the garden to the kitchen porch. The paint was peeling from the steps. "Isn't it lonely here for you," I wanted to say, but I kept silent. I was afraid she would think I wanted to take advantage of her loneliness and I didn't want her to think a wrong thing of me. What I felt for her had to do with her self and not with her being alone.

She took off the railroad cap and loosened her hair. Her fingers left tracks of topsoil on her forehead. I felt that I knew her very well—as parker, shopper, drinker, digger—yet didn't understand her at all. "It's hard to know you," I said.

She made a face. "I'm simple," she said. "Either silent or shouting. Look, I've got to get these in the ground." She showed me the chrysanthemum s e c t i o n s. "Maybe later, when the sun's gone down. I'm late with them. I should have divided them a month ago. Wait here." She got down from the steps, then disappeared around the corner of the house for a few moments, and came back empty-handed. "I've put them in the shade."

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The back of the house faced west. The hot late sunlight was pouring across the garden and into our faces. A rough-barked oak grew just beyond the steps, high-limbed and choked with dead wood. The shade fell on the driveway, and beyond. I squinted up into the tree. "You want to get those dead limbs out of there," I told her. "It's bad for the tree. Don't you know anything about trees? You could get some of that lumber on your head some day."

She didn't answer. A squirrel was posed out on the end of one of the dead limbs. Very pretty. "Oh, for God's sake," I said.

"What?"

"Nothing. Those are n i c e - looking tomatoes you've g o t there."

She looked pleased. "They're good. It's a new variety from the Ag Station up here. It's just got a number, no name yet. They're meaty and the plants don't wilt. We used to grow Rutgers but they weren't always good. A friend of mine with the College gave me the plants." I felt jealous of the friend with the College and the we who used to grow Rutgers. Both.

"It must be lonely for you here," I said.

She got to her feet. "I really must get those sections in the ground."

"That's stupid, to put them in now. You don't want the sun on them. Can't we talk for a little while longer?"

"All right," she said. But she didn't sit down again.

"Have you lived here long?"

"In this house? Five years. Six. We started those chrysanthemums from seed. Hardly anyone bothers to do that any more. But you really ought to see them. A lot of singles, but all colors. All the colors you can imagine. And every plant is different."

We were standing very close. I was astonished to see tears come into her eyes. "And I intend to see them in bloom again. I'm staying. They all thought I'd be out of here a long time ago. But I'm not going to leave until I'm ready. Not a minute before. I'm going to plant them, pinch them, water them, weed them, and pick them. By the middle of October they'll be finished. Hard frost. Then I'll leave."

"Where will you go?" I asked her. I was dismayed that she was going and that made no sense, because by the fall I would have gone a lot farther myself. Remember Africa.

"I don't know where I'll go. But," she said again, "I'm not going to leave until I'm ready."

Pariah. I remembered h e r standing alone at Tom's party.

I gestured at the garden. "He died, you said."

She nodded. "Oh, yes," she said. "He died."

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Well, how? I wondered. It was no long respectable illness. All that vigorous gardening. And he must have been, probably was, young. Drink? An accident? Maybe she was driving. Maybe that was it. "How did he die?"

Her voice was matter-of-fact. She was back on familiar ground. "I shot him."

Then she turned and walked up the kitchen steps, quickly but not running. The door slammed behind her. The basket of tomatoes was lying on the step in the sun. I left it there and drove home.

I kept away the next day and the next day and the one after that. Then I went back. I drove into the driveway. The weeds seemed taller to me, like a threat. She was sitting on the back steps staring out across the garden. She got to her feet as I walked to her. I took her hand. We didn't say anything. After a while she said, "Come into the house. I'll fix you something to drink."

After that time I went to her every evening directly from the office. Sometimes I took her out to dinner at a place I found up the road near Tompkinsville where we didn't run into anyone she knew. More and more often she cooked something or threw a salad together, or I picked up cold cuts or a couple of steaks. The tomatoes from the Ag Station seeds were very good—tasty and solid. In the evenings we weeded the garden or sat on the back porch steps and talked, or were quiet. Sometimes we went in the house. I was in love with her.

I liked the quiet times best. I liked to watch her work in the kitchen or in her garden. She had a quiet, put-together way of moving. I liked to look at the back of her neck and the slope of her shoulders and the arms and the back, and the narrow long waist and round hips. I remembered my first sight of her, walking into the little store and the screen door closing behind her.

"I can't believe there was a time I didn't know you," I said. It was a wrong kind of thing to say, under the circumstances. Cruel, even. The time when I wasn't going to know her was going to start again very soon. And I said other things like that.

She never answered directly but she'd look as though I'd given her some secret drink of intoxicating power. Something in her eyes and in the set of her mouth would change. I didn't say it to make the effect. I'd hear myself saying the injudicious things, as if the truth were compelled out of me. And all the time the end of summer was coming and I lived one day at a time.

She talked to me freely about killing her husband. Matter-of-fact, sitting across from me at

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the kitchen table, telling me about it in a steady voice, getting it out of the way. It had been, she said, an accident. He had liked to hunt. She had not, but she had gone with him, on occasion, anyway. "I'm companionable," she explained to me, smiling a little, smoothing back her hair with her strong, longfingered hand—a gesture I got to be familiar with. She was silent a lot, she told me. But companionable. It was not a mean silence, just her nature.

The shotgun that killed him had been returned to her by the police. If I cared to see it I could look up to the bend in the stairway, just crane around from where I sat. I didn't have to. I had seen the gunrack on the landing when I came in; it was a funny old house, full of nooks and angles and useless space. The stair landing was visible from the kitchen.

"Look at it and know it," she insisted. "It's the middle one. Otherwise you'll be wondering and sneaking looks." I looked. I didn't expect to feel anything about it and oddly it gave me a jolt. The middle one; she had taken it in her hands and killed a man with it, a man who had slept with her. I turned back to her, meeting her eyes with conscious effort.

"There," she said to me, "that's over with." She told me the rest of it. He had died here, in the kitchen. "Where you are sitting," she said. He had asked her to bring him the gun. She had got it from the rack and it had fired as she gave it to him. She sounded like a child reciting something learned by rote. "I sound like a parrot," she said at the end. "I have told it over and over. But that is what happened."

There had, of course, been an inquiry, of a fairly extensive nature. Their friends had stood by her; they had been well-liked as a couple. "People liked Dick better than they liked me," she said. "I seem cold, or stand-offish. I'm not really. But I seem so. Dick was the hearty type. We knew a lot of people. You met some of them at Tom and Jane's. Those two are still kind to me. They are the only ones. But everyone stood by me when Dick died. It was important that they did. There were no witnesses, after all, to the shooting. The police relied on what they could find out about me, my character, about my relationship with Dick. The gun was in my hands when he was shot. I told them so. I was bringing it to him and I tripped over a torn edge of the linoleum."

I looked, involuntarily, downward.

"I keep meaning to have it fixed. But I tripped, so that I fell against the table, and the gun went off, and Dick fell over, very slowly. It was like slow motion,

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the whole thing, or something happening in a dream. It seemed to me at any moment of its happening that I could have stopped it or made something else happen, but it kept happening. There was nothing I could do, I was off balance, and I suppose it all took just a few seconds, really."

"But I don't understand about everyone," I said. "The people in town, I mean. Your friends. What's gone wrong?" I was remembering George Russell, the leers, the suggestive glances, the silences, the odd looks on the night of Tom's party. And I seemed to have been ringed with a peculiar atmosphere ever since that night. It was a small town and I was sure that everyone who knew me, and a lot of people who didn't, knew where I spent my time.

"They testified, you see, that Dick and I were very happy. That they knew us very well, and that I could not conceivably, in their view, have wished to kill Dick, or even to hurt him. Then when it was all over, the inquiry closed and the gun back in this house, they turned their backs on me."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "Because they all lied. Out of kindness to me, or maybe they were squeamish. Maybe they didn't want the trial and the publicity and all that. I don't know people's motives. Maybe they didn't want me to die or spend a lot of years in prison because of something they said or guessed. Maybe it was bad enough that Dick had died here in the kitchen. We quarreled, you see, the two of us. Like cat and dog. Everybody knew it. It was an ugly habit we had got into. And it had been going on for, I don't know, three years.

"We had our first public quarrel, and after that we never seemed able to get back on common ground. Sometimes I think Dick hated me. I'm not an easy person and we were too different. We never should have married each other. We'd have had good marriages, I think, with other people. Dick's temper got worse and worse. Twice, two different times, he hit me. In front of people. I don't know how much longer we could have gone on together. I don't believe in divorce, really."

She paused, and sighed. Those eyes, in their beautiful deep sockets, were downcast. She was staring at the table. "So you see, they lied for me. And they all believe that I killed him. Which I did. But they think I wanted him to die. Or killed him in a fit of temper. They think I murdered him. If they had just turned their backs on me," she said with a sort of sad intensity, "it wouldn't be so painful. But they—"

"What? What has everyone done to you?"

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She raised her eyebrows, then smiled. "Just that. Turned their backs. That's all. It's enough, really. It has been very difficult for me here. I feel like the leper with his little bell."

"Lonely."

"No. I'm not lonely. I'm alone. I don't want to be with them. Come on." She jumped to her feet. "I'm hungry. Would you like something cold? Or steak? Steak and salad?"

"But all that gardening," I said. I was bewildered. "I thought you must have been very happy. People that gardened together."

She laughed. "It was the only time we didn't quarrel. Gardening together. We were tired and our hands were full and we worked side by side. It was the only good thing. Wait until you see Dick's chrysanthemums. He was a wonderful gardener."

"I'll be gone by then," I said. I hated Dick.

She stood very still, upright, by the sink. "Don't say that," she said. "I don't want to know that."

A couple of nights later I said to her. "But why do they hate you? You're not hateful. Do they really think you meant to kill him?"

"Do they? I don't know. Do they think so? Do you think so? After the hearing, when everything was quiet again, a couple of the men thought I must be lonely. You know? And I wasn't, not for them. So they all turned against me. First one, then another, then everybody."

That conversation took place on a Monday night. The next day George Russell caught up with me at the water cooler and said something filthy about Kay. I punched him in the mouth. I didn't know I'd done it until I saw the blood well up from his lip. I looked at my knuckles. They were white and turning red. He smiled at me with his mouth wet and red as though he'd scored a point.

"You're a pair," he said. "You're a pair."

Before the day ended, Tom Stanley called me into his office. I apologized for the business at the water cooler. "Why don't you stay away from her?" he asked me. "It's none of my business what you do, but she's bad news, believe me."

"I don't believe you," I said.

But all the same. I was full of unease, and anger, and distrust. It seemed to build inside me as time went on.

We were, it should be plain, in the midst of a love affair. There seemed to be no way I could put a stop to it. I lived for the time of day when I could be with her. I was drawn to her. She asked nothing of me, and never said, even, will I see you again. She was steady and loving and I

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couldn't believe she had killed in anger. Yet, under the steadiness I began to sense that she knew they all had got to me. She grew sad as time went on. Withdrawn. Not passing moods; something barely felt, but always there.

August was ending, and I would soon be hearing from the Africans. We never spoke of it directly. But she spoke about the future, once or twice; not ours, not mine, just her own. When the garden was finished in the late fall she would shut up the house and go away.

"What will you do?" I asked her.

"I don't know. I used to do editorial work. But I feel as though that were in another age. I don't want to do editorial work. I wish I could just be someone's gardener. I just don't know. My mind hurts."

But often she shook off the mood and was gay and lively and amusing. I loved to watch her being domestic, fixing things at the kitchen sink. I couldn't imagine being with any other woman. She was quick-tempered, I found, as I have always been, and we began to quarrel over little things, things that don't matter, always ending in laughter and love-making.

The summer wore on. The earliest of the chrysanthemums began to bloom. The house became like my own house, familiar in all ways: its chipped paint, a loose banister I had nailed into place. I was always conscious of the gunrack and its contents. It seemed remarkable to me that the police had brought back that shotgun. And yet, why not? It belonged to the Bannermans and it had been involved in an accident. Just that. When I stood beside the refrigerator and turned a certain way I could see it there on the landing and my eyes were drawn to it.

One evening—it was the start of the Labor Day week-end—she noticed me staring at it.

"I've used it since, you know," she said.

"Used it!"

"There were rabbits in the garden. I tried everything to make them stay away. They were destroying the last of Dick's garden. There was a little Redbud tree, a variety that he had rooted. They ate it to the ground. It seemed too bad. I felt that enough of him had been destroyed," she said passionately. "I couldn't stand it about his flowers and things. I know what you think of me. Don't think I don't know what goes on in your mind. But I couldn't stand it about the rabbits. I went out there and I shot at them, not to kill them but to frighten them away. Not just once"—she had turned to face me directly, her eyes intent, holding mine—"not just once. On

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three separate successive evenings. Then they stayed away."

That night we made love like strangers.

Then, just a week later, I had to say the thing we had both been waiting for. Usually she was outside, working in the garden or sitting on the steps, just waiting for me, when I drove in. This time she was in the kitchen and I walked in and sat down at the table where her husband used to sit. I remember looking down at my hands clasped on my knees, my arms, bare in the heat, tanned, the hair bleached with the sun. I felt the news was printed on my forehead. She had been standing at the sink, cutting a stalk of celery into bits. She turned around, the knife in her hand, and looked at me without saying a word.

"They called me today," I said. "They want me out there by the first of October."

She kept staring at me like a blind woman, but a blind woman who saw everything. Then she dropped the knife, not on the counter but on the floor, and came to where I sat and dropped to her knees and put her arms around my legs. She crouched there for minutes, her face buried in the cuff of my trousers. Then she looked up at my face. Her eyes were dry. I felt the tears start in my own.

"No," she said.

"I have to go."

"Please." Her voice broke. She caught her bottom lip between her teeth.

But she didn't cry.

I stood up and pulled her gently to her feet. I put my arms around her, and she stayed quite still in my embrace. After a while she put my arms away from her and moved back to the sink. Her face was pale and almost without expression. She stooped and picked up the knife and straightened again, put back the hair from her forehead, every line of her body, every gesture and movement so known to me.

"I can't let you go," she said. As I came to her she shook her head. "No," she said. "Don't touch me. I've got to think. You know, I know what we'll do. We'll eat. Then I'll think. I'll think later." She sounded as simple as a child, a child in pain and determined not to show it. She turned back to the sink and started to cut the celery again. Now she was crying.

"Do you think I want to leave you? Do you? Do you?" I was hoarse.

She turned to face me again. "I don't know."

"Kay, I have to go. Try to understand. It's something I *have to do*. I promised this to myself. I gave up a good job for this and I got rid of everything that mattered to me and every *one*

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that mattered to me. I have to explore the world a little and explore myself. This is the time of my life when that's the thing I *have* to do. Now. *This* time. The time isn't going to come again. Kay, *I have to do it.*"

I was terrified I wouldn't be able to leave her; not that she could make me stay but that *I* wouldn't go. "I have to do it," I said again. "Do you think I want to go now? Do you think I want to leave you?"

"I don't know," she repeated, shaking her head. "I just don't know. I only know if it were myself, I could never leave you. How can we leave each other?" She made a small gesture of asking, or of despair. She was still holding the knife. "Do you love me?" She sounded shy.

"Yes, I love you."

"Then how can I let you go? How can I?"

Suddenly I couldn't stand it any more. "Will you stop that! Will you? Will you?" I was shouting. "And will you put down that damn knife!"

Her head came up and her mouth opened. She looked as if I'd struck her. She fumbled behind her for the counter, and put the knife on it, without even turning around.

I hated what I was doing. I hated myself for it. I hated her for standing in my way. I hated her because I loved her. I was standing with my back to the refrigerator. I wrenched my eyes away from her and my glance fell on the gunrack. "Get that damned thing out of the house!" I shouted. I raced up the stairs after it. The case was unlocked. I grabbed the middle gun out of the rack and tramped back into the kitchen with it.

"You must be crazy to keep this in the house," I shouted at her. "You have no feelings. None at all. If you had any feelings you couldn't have this gun in the house."

I flung open the screen door and walked heavily out onto the back porch. The sun was still in the sky, warm and golden, much farther to the south than when we had first stood here together. How many times had we not stood or sat together on these steps, time after time, before love and after love, in the beneficence of the summer evenings. I looked at the gun in my hand as though a stranger had put it there. I was bitterly ashamed. I heard her open the kitchen door behind me and I turned. She was calm, not crying.

"I must have been out of my mind," I said.

"No," she said. "It's difficult, that's all. My situation. And you going away. The whole thing is difficult. I shouldn't have tried to keep you. I swore to myself that I wouldn't stand in your way

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when the time came. I'm sorry. I really am."

"But I love you."

She smiled a soft and gentle smile—the calm after the storm. "You'd better put down the gun," she said. "I think it's loaded."

I set it down hastily, propped in the angle of the porch railing and the top step. I smiled back at her. Some kind of madness seemed to have passed. The gun was simply an instrument for frightening rabbits. I trusted her absolutely. And I never loved her more than in that moment.

"I'll get on with dinner," she said, and turned back to the kitchen. At the screen door she hesitated. "Pick us some tomatoes?" she asked me. "Pick two. No, three. And make sure they're ripe. You brought me some green ones last time."

Tomatoes. At the far end of the garden. Three hundred feet in a straight line—and the loaded gun between us.

I didn't trust her after all.

But I loved her and I had hurt her enough. And I am, though this would not have occurred to anyone, a gentleman. "All right," I said, my lips tight across my teeth.

I walked down the steps, leaving the gun where it stood. To have moved it would have been to destroy her. When I had gone a dozen paces into the garden I turned and looked behind me, because she hadn't gone into the kitchen. I should have heard the door. She was still standing there, her back against the door, looking after me, still faintly smiling.

I turned and walked on, stiff-legged as though I were forcing my way through water. I didn't want to move but I had to keep going. The tomatoes were still 50 yards away and maybe farther than that, maybe on the other side of eternity.

I plowed on, fighting the undertow. I passed a small clump of chrysanthemums starting to show color, and I thought of the man whose flowers they were. Helpless to stop myself, I turned once again and looked back at her.

She still stood there, looking after me. In the oak beside the porch two squirrels spiraled up and down the trunk, hell-bent for happiness. She saw me look at them, and I think she laughed. Then she turned and opened the screen door and walked into the kitchen. The door s l a m m e d behind her and the shotgun toppled over and I flung myself to the ground.

There was a great bloody gully across my thigh, nothing to inconvenience me, and a scattering of lesser wounds from the ankles on up. The pattern, Kay said admiringly in the hospital, reminded her of the way one is supposed to scatter crocus bulbs.

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I have now been confined in this place for two weeks. My bags are packed for A f r i c a — K a y packed them—and her bags are packed for Africa; all the summer clothing she could buy in the local stores. Tomorrow morning I will get out of this place and on Friday morning we will get married, the Stanleys in attendance. Then we will drive down to the city and that night we will fly to Matanzia together. Being, both of us, incapable of looking after our own selves, we are going to look after each other. Put another way, the battle between us has only begun, and will now be carried on at infinite length and in a hotter climate.

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two for the

DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Eugenia Klein Gingold's first story, "A Tale Told Out of School," appeared in the December 1963 issue of EQMM. Now, seven years later, we give you her second story—and, with this encouragement, we hope she won't make us wait that long for her third.

Once again we witness the miracle of two writers, each writing her second piece of fiction, the two of them persisting, persevering, and producing stories that are light-years apart in so many ways. And once again we wonder at the infinite variety that the creative impulses are capable of. "Age cannot wither . . . nor custom stale" truly creative minds . . .

Eugenia Klein Gingold's second story will haunt you—but then so will Kathyrn Gottlieb's . . .

THE PEACOCK

by EUGENIA KLEIN GINGOLD

A QUIRKY SMILE TUGGED AT Ellen Beachey's lips as the man beside her rose to leave. He would be back—she was sure of that. Or someone else would come. Even Alma Sutton, who gave herself such uppity airs, had to concede that no one had more visitors than Ellen. Alma was jealous, of course—just couldn't stand anyone else getting attention. Ellen would never confide anything to *her*. Still, it was very annoying. Ellen wanted to tell *someone* the strange thing about the peacock. It might help to keep the fantasies from creeping back—the fantasies about Rosemary . . .

Until the fifth grade in a Connecticut grammar school the colors in Ellen Beachey's life were the chalky-blackboard gray of a classroom, the cracked-porcelain

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off-white of her scrubbed kitchen at home, and the wintergreen mustiness of her heart-diseased, arthritic mother's bedroom. When Rosemary Calder, newly arrived in town, opened the door of classroom 5A, a rainbow followed her into the room. Crowned with heavy braids of red hair above a creamy, fairy-tale-princess face, Rosemary was the instant idol of all the girls. The boys, immediately in love, inked surreptitious arrow-pierced hearts on their hands and wrists, enclosing Rosemary's initials with their own.

To everyone's astonishment Rosemary conferred the prized gift of best-friendship on the littlest nobody in the class—Ellen Beachey. Ellen luxuriated in this coveted position. By the end of the term, however, she understood more clearly the nature of Rosemary's "gift." She was expected to carry messages, keep secrets, run errands, brush the shining hair when the braids loosened after P.T., share lunch when her own was tastier, and take full charge of Rosemary's homework.

In return, many of Rosemary's invitations to parties spilled over to include Ellen. Of course, she couldn't go to most of them since she was needed at home to attend to her ailing mother, but it was gratifying to be asked. Then, too, while she was busy helping Rosemary with her homework, her own marks improved. She also got to wear many of Rosemary's discarded clothes—expensive items supplied by an indulgent, adoring widower-father. That was a useful bonus you couldn't sneeze at, Ellen's mother reminded her thriftily.

Things went along reasonably well until the Public Speaking Contest, the most important school event of the year. The winner was to be taken by one of the teachers on an overnight trip, upstate, to compete with other winners. Ellen came out top of her school, declaiming her original composition, "Sail on, Columbus!" But as usual she couldn't leave her mother alone, so the runner-up was sent in her place—Rosemary.

At first, when Ellen had won, Rosemary had been all sugar and drip. She would be glad to come and help out with Mrs. Beachey. But when Rosemary realized that the second-place winner would go in Ellen's place, she changed her tune. After all, if Ellen had responsibilities at home she ought not to deny her best friend the chance that she couldn't take anyway. That was when Ellen first noticed Rosemary's sly triumphant wink and her self-satisfied smirk.

When Rosemary returned from the upstate Public Speaking Contest, she had won a gold medal

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which her father set into a brooch. Rosemary wore it prominently displayed on every occasion. Ellen was infuriated. She wanted to stay clear of Rosemary then and there. However, her mother pointed out that although Rosemary could manage without her, *she* could not do without Rosemary. Chagrined, Ellen had to swallow her rage and fall back into her accustomed "role."

Feeling cheated and resentful, with Rosemary's brooch constantly before her eyes, Ellen's fantasies began. At night she would lie on her bed, staring at the ceiling and imagining *herself* performing at the upstate contest, with Rosemary having to stay home. Her daydreams seemed very real, but all too soon Ellen had to force herself back into her daily entrapment with a "best friend" she couldn't stand.

In high school Ellen became a "grind," while Rosemary majored in boys. Rosemary suddenly needed Ellen for more than help with her homework. Her friendships with girls had dwindled, for they viewed her popularity as a threat. Rosemary now depended on Ellen exclusively for girl talk, and also for the strategic removal of rejected boy friends. Ellen had the privilege of double dating with her. Of course, it was a little disheartening to see her escorts forever slanting calf-eyes in Rosemary's direction—or to pick herself up from an ice-skating fall while Rosemary was safely squired around the rink between two pairs of firm, sustaining arms. But, her mother remarked judiciously, a bird in the hand was better than no dates at all.

High school graduation brought another Rosemary crisis. Ellen won a college scholarship, but had to turn it down. Her mother, of course—but also, the funds would not fully cover the expenses. Rosemary's wink and smirk knifed Ellen as she helped her shop for clothes and pack to leave for one of the most expensive schools in the country. Ellen's fantasies flared up again—this time of Rosemary left at home, drowning in tears, and Ellen driving up on campus in a block-long chauffeured limousine.

Ellen resigned herself to a business course. Her first job was a real plum—secretary in the firm of Widdicomb, Lester and Pine, attorneys-at-law. Ralph Widdicomb, her boss, was a fascinating, dynamic man—and unmarried. He considered Ellen a perfect secretary, raised her salary twice and took her out to dinner whenever he needed her to work late. Ellen adored him. Secretaries *had* been known to marry their bosses, her mother commented.

During the holidays Rosemary came home from college in her usual flurry of radiance. It was

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inevitable for her and Ralph to meet—and to fall in love. Ellen couldn't put a barrel over his head to hide him. On the day of the wedding Ellen, lying down with a sick headache, daydreamed her own wedding to Ralph with a tearstained Rosemary looking on. The dream was as clear as if it were really taking place. Then she rose, dressed in her maid-of-honor gown, and still half in a trance fulfilled her obligations at her best friend's nuptials. There were other fish in the sea, Ellen's mother sniffed testily, but unconvincingly.

Ellen continued to work for Ralph—her job was too good to leave. Rosemary invited Ellen over a great deal. After all, hadn't Ellen been responsible for the match? Ellen's private fantasies increased. It was *she* who was living with Ralph. Ellen's mother began to complain of her long minutes of abstraction. Ralph had to repeat things to her at work. Rosemary, twisting her wedding band, scolded her about woolgathering so often.

When Rosemary gave birth to a little boy, Ellen was godmother. Little Bobby now took first place in Ellen's real world and dream world. She was the only one who "understood" him. She was more his mother than flighty Rosemary. She baby-sat, coddled Bobby, baked cookies for him, dried his tears when Rosemary spanked him, and later helped him with his lessons when Rosemary couldn't be bothered.

When Bobby was graduated from high school and went off to the university, Ellen wrote him lengthily and lovingly. Bobby answered infrequently and briefly. He was wrapped up in his studies, Ellen told herself. Then his letters to Ellen stopped altogether. Rosemary began to mention "love to Aunt Ellen" at the end of his letters to her. Shortly before his graduation, Rosemary read Ellen her most recent letter from Bob.

"—so I'll see you at graduation next week, mother. You'll be proud to know I'm being awarded a fellowship. By the way, have I ever told you what a wonderful mother you've been. Beautiful, lots of fun, yet strict about my behavior. You always let me find my own way, never interfered in my work or babied me. It made me grow up strong and competent, become a responsible adult. I owe you a lot. I've often compared you with Aunt Ellen. She was always very nice to me when I was a kid, but I'm sure if I had been *her* child, I'd have been spoiled rotten."

Blood is thicker than water, Ellen's mother sniffed when she heard.

In the years that followed, old Mrs. Beachey died. Shortly after that, Rosemary's father passed on, too. Ellen weathered her mother's

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death quite well, but Rosemary grieved for a long time. Just when she had begun to recover her spirits, Ralph was killed in a car accident, and Rosemary's bright hair began to show unmistakable streaks of gray.

Although Ellen was outwardly sympathetic, it secretly pleased her to see the high-and-mighty Rosemary's comeuppance—alone now, aging, her doting father and Ralph both gone. Rosemary had even lost something of Robert, who was now a college professor. He came to visit his mother less and less, irritated by her endless complaining and whining about her faded looks, her lost husband and the dullness and emptiness of her life.

And then the peacock appeared.

Ellen was awakened one wintry morning by hearing the snap of twigs in her back yard. At first she could see nothing outside. "Prowlers," she thought with annoyance. However, to her surprise, stepping daintily into view from under the s n o w - h e a v y hemlock branches was a magnificent peacock, his tail fanned out in a burst of iridescent colors. He seemed to feel himself quite at home and strutted about with a distinctly comfortable air.

What on earth was a peacock doing out there? And what was one supposed to do about it? Ellen postponed action. Perhaps h e would go away. Ellen put him out of her mind and went on with her chores for the day. In the afternoon, when she glanced out, having almost forgotten the peacock, she was startled to see him still marching about. He had folded his tail and appeared a little cold, but still seemed very much at home.

I really must do *something*, Ellen thought unhappily. I'll try calling Rosemary.

Rosemary's incredulous shriek, "A peacock?" stung Ellen's eardrums. "Are you daydreaming again?" she belittled. "What would a peacock be doing in your yard?"

When Ellen convinced her, with great difficulty, that the peacock was a reality, she promised to run right over to see for herself.

Rosemary was t r u l y flabbergasted as she peered out of Ellen's kitchen window. The regal bird obligingly spread his tail feathers and paraded up and down as if he were in a fashion show.

"He's gorgeous," Rosemary squealed. "And he's really there. I wonder who he belongs to."

Ellen mentally checked her neighbors. "Nobody around here raises peacocks."

"Well, there's only one thing to do," said Rosemary. "The Sheriff has to be notified."

"A peacock?" The Sheriff guffawed when she reached him. "This I've got to see. I'll be right over."

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Rosemary then called the local ASPCA. They had never had a peacock as one of their charges. They, too, would be over immediately.

Within an hour there was quite a crowd of people outside Ellen's gate. The Sheriff, clucking valiantly, tried to entice the squawking bird into a corner of the yard, while the ASPCA men were in a tree, ready to drop a net over the reluctant bird's head. The newspaper reporters and photographers chattered away, interviewing and snapping pictures. Flashbulbs went off like firecrackers. The neighbors pointed and stared and the children jabbered and screeched. The ASPCA finally netted the bird, tied his legs carefully, and hauled him away. The crowd dispersed and the Sheriff, reporters, and photographers drove off.

The event made quite a sensation. The next day the papers were full of the peacock—and of Rosemary. It turned out that the bird had been on a truck that was driving through town to deliver him to a zoo. The driver had stopped for coffee at a diner on the highway. Somehow, the truck's tailgate had slipped its latch and dropped. The peacock had jumped down and stalked off through the woods.

Rosemary was the star of the story. In great detail the newspaper articles reported how she had been visiting her friend and had spotted the peacock through the window. They told how she had called the Sheriff, the ASPCA, and the neighbors. They showed close-ups of Rosemary and the bird—Rosemary talking to the Sheriff and the ASPCA men—Rosemary shaking hands with the grateful truck driver who lost the peacock. Ellen Beachey might just as well have never existed.

That night Rosemary brought over the latest clippings about the peacock to show Ellen as she prepared dinner. Ellen was so furious she could only mumble incoherent responses. She kept moving about, trying to keep her body from trembling and her simmering anger from boiling over. Rosemary read every story aloud from beginning to end—not once, but twice, her brooch bouncing on her heaving chest. She savored each word like a delicious mouthful and thrust the pictures under Ellen's nose to see Mrs. Ralph Widdicomb and her peacock in the yard, Mrs. Ralph Widdicomb and her peacock on the truck.

Ellen's hands shook as she kept busy cutting the vegetables into a bowl. And then Rosemary winked—her ridiculous, superior, know-it-all wink—and followed it with the well-remembered smirk of having put something over on Ellen again. The vegetable bowl

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fell to the floor and shattered as Ellen suddenly lurched forward and stabbed her.

After that Ellen remembered things only foggily. There was the messy haze of cleaning up—a lot of dragging and digging, and for a long while the heat in the house did not seem to be working properly. There was a deep slash on one of her hands, and for the life of her Ellen couldn't remember when or how she had cut herself. Also, people kept telephoning rather oddly to ask if she had seen Rosemary. What on earth made them think she knew where Rosemary was at all hours of the day? And so one numb gray day went by pretty much as the numb gray day before it.

And then she heard a familiar crackle of twigs in the back yard. The peacock's come back, she thought. Even before she looked she was sure it was he. And there he was indeed, outside her kitchen window, boldly strutting about again, his tail fanned out in a brilliant sweep of color. Ellen smiled at him. She would show Rosemary *this* time. She would call the Sheriff and the newspapers and the ASPCA. And this time it would be *her* peacock.

Her stiff fingers dialed the number of the newspaper. The voice answering the phone was apathetic. They weren't interested. One peacock story was enough.

The ASPCA was next. "Well now," the man in the office joked, "are we having a run on lost peacocks these days?" His men were out on another call, he informed Ellen, but when they got around to her area later, why, they'd look into things if the peacock was really there.

Ellen nearly cried with frustration. Nobody seemed to take her peacock seriously. She finally got hold of the Sheriff. He sighed, audibly bored. "Miss Beachey, are you sure you're not dreaming up this second peacock?"

Ellen glanced out of the window. The peacock was slowly swishing by. She could see the top of his blue-green feathers from where she stood. "Sheriff, there *is* a peacock in my back yard again. You just come on over and see for yourself."

The Sheriff sighed again and grumbled as he hung up. When he stood in her kitchen, stolid and unconvinced, Ellen Beachey pointed through the window. "There he is, Sheriff—big as life. Can't you see him?"

The Sheriff squinted and shook his head. "I don't see anything out there, Miss Beachey. Just your snow-covered mountain laurel and your hemlocks."

Ellen was angered. "You must need glasses! He's there—back under the hemlock branches."

The Sheriff shrugged. "Don't see a damn thing, ma'am."

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Ellen felt a volcanic desire to shake him. Her voice rose. "Don't you dare tell me he's not there when I can see him so plainly!"

Directed by Ellen, standing in her kitchen doorway, the Sheriff crunched through the snow toward the low-branched hemlocks at the back of her yard. The air hung crisp and still.

"Farther back," Ellen called. "He's standing there with his feathers spread out."

The Sheriff took another step and stumbled over a stiffly bunched piece of fabric. He kicked it away impatiently with his booted foot; then his attention was caught by something shiny pinned to it. He turned back slowly and examined it more carefully. He heard Ellen call, "Well, Sheriff?" as he pulled the bloodstained dress out of the frozen earth . . .

Ellen rocked contentedly in the big creaky chair. It didn't really matter about not being able to talk to Alma Sutton. There were plenty of others who were eager to listen to every word she was willing to say . . .

From the moment the Sheriff came back into her house she no longer had any cause for complaint. The ASPCA men had finally shown up and weren't they excited! The Sheriff had made at least a dozen phone calls and big black cars kept arriving with their sirens screaming. People kept coming and going and making a big commotion out in the street.

The newspapermen and the photographers turned out to be interested after all. They could hardly get through the crowds to the front door. They just wouldn't stop taking pictures of Ellen —more than they ever took of Rosemary. The news spread so fast that word must have even got through to Bobby. Professor Robert Widdicomb showed up to see *her*. He didn't look too well to Ellen, but then she didn't see him as much as she used to.

Everybody was very kind and very attentive. They took her downtown in a special car and listened very carefully. She certainly had lots to tell them. Oh, yes, people fussed over *her* now, and nobody bothered about Rosemary any more. Every dog has its day, Ellen's mother would have said . . .

Ellen rocked happily. Only one thing made her a little uneasy. It was a thing she couldn't seem to tell anybody. It was about the peacock. Just as sure as she was sitting here in this peaceful, big place, being waited on hand and foot, watched over day and night—well, just before the Sheriff's car had taken her downtown, she had turned back for a last look, and darned if the peacock hadn't winked at her—first winked, and then smirked.

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a TOMMY and TUPPENCE parody-pastiche by

AGATHA CHRISTIE

In which Tommy and Tuppence Beresford, husband-and-wife proprietors and directors of Blunt's Brilliant Detectives (that "classical" inquiry agency), emulate the methods of Freeman Wills Crofts's Inspector French—legwork, brainwork, and never-say-die . . . In "The Unbreakable Alibi" (about which Tuppence said, "This alibi business is very trying"), the lighthearted 'tec team undertakes to find the flaw in a "cast-iron" alibi: how could Una Drake, the pretty young Australian—"such a sporting girl"—have been in London and in Torquay, some two hundred miles apart, at one and the same time? How, indeed! . . .

THE UNBREAKABLE ALIBI

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

TOMMY AND TUPPENCE Beresford were busy sorting correspondence. Tuppence gave an exclamation and handed a letter across to Tommy.

"A new client," she said importantly.

"Ha!" said Tommy. "What do we deduce from this letter, Watson? Nothing much, except the somewhat obvious fact that Mr.—er—Montgomery Jones is not one of the world's best spellers, thereby proving that he has been expensively educated."

"Montgomery Jones?" said Tuppence. "Now what do I know about a Montgomery Jones? Oh, yes, I have it now. I think Janet St. Vincent mentioned him. His mother was Lady Aileen Montgomery, very crusty and high church, with gold crosses and things, and she married a man called Jones who is immensely rich."

"In fact, the same old story," said Tommy. "Let me see, what time does this Mr. M. J. wish to see us? Ah, eleven thirty."

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At eleven thirty precisely a tall young man with an amiable and ingenuous countenance entered the outer office and addressed himself to Albert, the office boy.

"Look here—I say. Can I see Mr.—er—Blunt?"

"Have you an appointment, sir?" said Albert.

"I don't quite know. Yes, I suppose I have. What I mean is, I wrote a letter—"

"What name, sir?"

"Mr. Montgomery Jones."

"I will take your name in to Mr. Blunt."

He returned after a brief interval.

"Will you wait a few minutes, please, sir. Mr. Blunt is engaged in a very important conference at present."

"Oh—er—yes—certainly," said Mr. Montgomery Jones.

Having, he hoped, impressed his client sufficiently, Tommy rang the buzzer on his desk and Mr. Montgomery Jones was ushered into the inner office by Albert.

Tommy rose to greet him, and shaking him warmly by the hand motioned toward the vacant chair.

"Now, Mr. Montgomery Jones," he said briskly, "what can we have the pleasure of doing for you?"

Mr. Montgomery Jones looked uncertainly at the third occupant of the office.

"My confidential secretary, Miss Robinson," said Tommy. "You can speak quite freely before her. I take it that this is some family matter of a delicate kind?"

"Well—not exactly," said Mr. Montgomery Jones.

"You surprise me," said Tommy. "You are not in trouble of any kind yourself, I hope?"

"Oh, rather not," said Mr. Montgomery Jones.

"Well," said Tommy, "perhaps you will—er—state the facts plainly."

That, however, seemed to be the one thing that Mr. Montgomery Jones could not do.

"It's a dashed odd sort of thing I have to ask you," he said hesitatingly. "I—er—I really don't know how to set about it."

"We never touch divorce cases," said Tommy.

"Oh, Lord, no," said Mr. Montgomery Jones. "I don't mean that. It is just, well—it's a deuced silly sort of a joke. That's all."

"Someone has played a practical joke on you of a mysterious nature?" suggested Tommy.

But Mr. Montgomery Jones once more shook his head.

"Well," said Tommy, retiring gracefully from the position, "take your own time and let us have it in your own words."

There was a pause.

"You see," said Mr. Jones at last, "it was at dinner. I sat next to a girl."

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"Yes?" said Tommy encouragingly.

"She was a—oh, well, I really can't describe her, but she was simply one of the most sporting girls I ever met. She's an Australian over here with another girl, sharing a flat with her in Clarges Street. She's simply game for anything. I absolutely can't tell you the effect that girl had on me."

"We can quite imagine it, Mr. Jones," said Tuppence.

She saw clearly that if Mr. Montgomery Jones's troubles were ever to be extracted, a sympathetic feminine touch was needed, as distinct from the businesslike methods of Mr. "Blunt."

"We can understand," said Tuppence encouragingly.

"Well, the whole thing came as an absolute shock to me," said Mr. Montgomery Jones, "that a girl could, well—knock you over like that. There had been another girl—in fact, two other girls. One was awfully jolly and all that but I didn't much like her chin. She danced marvelously though and I have known her all my life, which makes a fellow feel kind of safe, you know.

"And then there was one of the girls at the 'Frivolity.' Frightfully amusing, but of course there would be a lot of ructions with the mater over that. Anyway, I really didn't want to marry either of them, but I was thinking about things, you know, and then—slap out of the blue—I sat next to this girl and—"

"The whole world was changed," said Tuppence in a feeling voice.

Tommy moved impatiently in his chair. He was by now somewhat bored by the recital of Mr. Montgomery Jones's love affairs.

"You put it awfully well," said Mr. Montgomery Jones. "That is absolutely what it was like. Only, you know, I fancy she didn't think much of me. You mayn't think it but I am not terribly clever."

"Oh, you mustn't be too modest," said Tuppence.

"Oh, I do realize that I am not much of a chap," said Mr. Jones with an engaging smile. "Not for a perfectly marvelous girl like that. That is why I just feel I've got to put this thing through. It's my only chance. She's such a sporting girl that she would never go back on her word."

"Well, I am sure we wish you luck and all that," said Tuppence kindly. "But I don't exactly see what you want us to do."

"Oh, Lord!" said Mr. Montgomery Jones. "Haven't I explained?"

"No," said Tommy. "You haven't."

"Well, it was like this. We were talking about detective stories.

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Una—that's her name—is just as keen about them as I am. We got talking about one in particular. It all hinges on an alibi. Then we got talking about alibis and faking them. Then I said—no, she said—now which of us was it that said it?"

"Never mind which of you it was," said Tuppence.

"I said it would be a jolly difficult thing to do. She disagreed—said it only wanted a bit of brainwork. We got all excited about it and in the end she said, 'I will make you a sporting offer. What do you bet that I can produce an alibi that nobody can shake?'

"Anything you like, I said, and we settled it then and there. She was frightfully cocksure about the whole thing. 'It's an odds-on chance for me,' she said. 'Don't be so sure of that,' I said; 'supposing you lose and I ask you for anything I like?' She laughed and said she came of a gambling family and I could."

"Well?" said Tuppence as Mr. Jones came to a pause and looked at her appealingly.

"Well, don't you see? It is up to me. It is the only chance I have of getting a girl like that to look at me. You have no idea how sporting she is. Last summer she was out in a boat and someone bet her she wouldn't jump overboard and swim ashore in her clothes, and she did it."

"It is a very curious proposition," said Tommy. "I am not quite sure I yet understand it."

"It is perfectly simple," said Mr. Montgomery Jones. "You must be doing this sort of thing all the time. Investigating fake alibis and seeing where they fall down."

"Oh—er—yes, of course," said Tommy. "We do a lot of that sort of work."

"Someone has got to do it for me," said Montgomery Jones. "I shouldn't be any good at that sort of thing myself. You have only got to catch her out and everything is all right. I daresay it seems rather a futile business to you but it means a lot to me and I am prepared to pay—er—all necessary whatnots, you know."

"That will be all right," said Tuppence. "I am sure Mr. Blunt will take the case on for you."

"Certainly, certainly," said Tommy. "A most refreshing case, most refreshing, indeed."

Mr. Montgomery Jones heaved a sigh of relief, pulled a mass of papers from his pocket, and selected one of them. "Here it is," he said. "She says, 'I am sending you proof I was in two distinct places at one and the same time. According to one story I dined at the Bon Temps Restaurant in Soho by myself, went to the Duke's Theatre, and had supper with a friend, Mr. le Marchant,

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at the Savoy—*but* I was also staying at the Castle Hotel, Torquay, and only returned to London the following morning. You have to find out which of the two stories is the true one and how I managed the other.'

"There," said Mr. Montgomery Jones. "Now you see what it is that I want you to do."

"A most refreshing little problem," Tommy remarked. "Very naive."

"Here is Una's photograph," said Mr. Montgomery Jones. "You will want that."

"What is the lady's full name?" inquired Tommy.

"Miss Una Drake. And her address is 180 Clarges Street."

"Thank you," said Tommy. "Well, we will look into the matter for you, Mr. Montgomery Jones. I hope we shall have good news for you very shortly."

"I say, you know, I am no end grateful," said Mr. Jones, rising to his feet and shaking Tommy by the hand. "It has taken an awful load off my mind."

Having seen his client out, Tommy returned to the inner office. Tuppence was at the cupboard that contained the Classic library.

"Inspector French," said Tuppence.

"Eh?" said Tommy.

"Inspector French, of course," said Tuppence. "He always does alibis. I know the exact procedure. We have to go over everything and check it. At first it will seem all right and then when we examine it more closely, we shall find the flaw."

"There ought not to be much difficulty about that," agreed Tommy. "I mean, knowing that one of them is a fake to start with makes the thing almost a certainty I should say. That is what worries me."

"I don't see anything to worry about in that."

"I'm worrying about the girl," said Tommy. "She will probably be let in to marry that young man whether she wants to or not."

"Darling," said Tuppence, "don't be foolish. Women are never the wild gamblers they appear. Unless that girl was already perfectly prepared to marry that pleasant but rather empty-headed young man, she would never have let herself in for a wager of this kind. But, Tommy, believe me, she will marry him with more enthusiasm and respect if he wins the wager than if she has to make it easy for him some other way."

"You do think you know about everything," said her husband.

"I do," said Tuppence.

"And now to examine our data," said Tommy, drawing the papers toward him. "First the photograph—hm—quite a nice-looking girl—and quite a good photograph I should say. Clear and easily recognizable."

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"We must get some other girls' photographs," said Tuppence.

"Why?"

"They always do," said Tuppence. "You show four or five to waiters and they pick out the right one."

"Do you think they do?" said Tommy. "Pick out the right one, I mean."

"Well, they do in books," said Tuppence.

"It's a pity that real life is so different from fiction," said Tommy. "Now then, what have we here? Yes, this is the London lot. Dined at the Bon Temps at seven thirty. Went to Duke's Theatre and saw *Delphiniums Blue*. Counterfoil of theatre ticket enclosed. Supper at the Savoy with Mr. le Marchant. We can, I suppose, interview Mr. le Marchant."

"That tells us nothing at all," said Tuppence, "because if he is helping her to do it he naturally won't give the game away. We can wash out anything he says now."

"Well, here is the Torquay end," went on Tommy. "Twelve o'clock train from Paddington, had lunch in the Restaurant Car, receipted bill enclosed. Stayed at Castle Hotel for one night. Again, receipted bill."

"I think this is all rather weak," said Tuppence. "Anyone can buy a theatre ticket and you need never go near the theatre. The girl just went to Torquay and the London thing is a fake."

"If so, it is rather a sitter for us," said Tommy. "Well, I suppose we might as well go and interview Mr. le Marchant anyway."

Mr. le Marchant proved to be a breezy youth who betrayed no great surprise on seeing them.

"Una has got some little game on, hasn't she?" he asked. "You never know what that kid is up to."

"I understand, Mr. le Marchant," said Tommy, "that Miss Drake had supper with you at the Savoy last Tuesday evening."

"That's right," said Mr. le Marchant. "I know it was Tuesday because Una impressed it on me at the time and what's more she made me write it down in a little book."

With some pride he showed an entry faintly penciled: "Having supper with Una. Savoy. Tuesday 19th."

"Where had Miss Drake been earlier in the evening? Do you know?"

"She had been to some rotten show called *Pink Peonies,* or something like that. Absolute slosh, so she told me."

"You are quite sure Miss Drake was with you that evening?"

Mr. le Marchant stared at him. "Why, of course. Haven't I been telling you?"

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"Perhaps she asked you to tell us that," said Tuppence.

"Well, for a matter of fact she did say something that was rather dashed odd. She said—what was it now? 'You think you are sitting here having supper with me, Jimmy, but really, I am having supper two hundred miles away in Devonshire.' Now that was a dashed odd thing to say, don't you think? Sort of astral-body stuff. The funny thing is that a pal of mine, Dicky Rice, thought he saw her there."

"Who is this Mr. Rice?"

"Oh, just a friend of mine. He had been down in Torquay staying with an aunt. Sort of old bean who is always going to die and never does. Dicky had been down doing the dutiful nephew. He said, 'I saw that Australian girl one day — Una something-or-other. Wanted to go and talk to her but my aunt carried me off to chat with an old Pussy in a bathchair.'

"I said, 'When was this?' and he said, 'Oh, Tuesday about tea time.' I told him, of course, that he had made a mistake, but it was odd, wasn't it? With Una saying that about Devonshire that evening."

"Very odd," said Tommy. "Tell me, Mr. le Marchant, did anyone you know have supper near you at the Savoy?"

"Some people called Oglander were at the next table."

"Do they know Miss Drake?"

"Oh, yes, they know her. They are not frightful friends or anything of that kind."

"Well, if there's nothing more you can tell us, Mr. le Marchant, I think we will wish you good morning."

"Either that chap is an extraordinary good liar," said Tommy as they reached the street, "or else he is speaking the truth."

"Yes," said Tuppence. "I have changed my opinion. I have a sort of feeling now that Una Drake *was* at the Savoy for supper that night."

"We will now go to the Bon Temps," said Tommy. "A little food for starving sleuths is clearly indicated. Let's just get a few girls' photographs first."

This proved rather more difficult than was expected. Turning into a photographer's and demanding a few assorted photographs, they were met with a cold rebuff.

"Why are all the things that are so easy and simple in books so difficult in real life?" wailed Tuppence. "How horribly suspicious he looked. What do you think he thought we wanted to do with the photographs? We had better go and raid Jane's flat."

Tuppence's friend Jane proved of an accommodating disposition and permitted Tuppence to rummage in a drawer and select four

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specimens of former friends of Jane's who had been shoved hastily in to be out of sight and mind.

Armed with this galaxy of feminine beauty they proceeded to the Bon Temps where fresh difficulties and much expense awaited them. Tommy had to get hold of each waiter in turn, tip him, and then produce the assorted photographs. The result was unsatisfactory. At least three of the photographs were promising starters as having dined there last Tuesday. They then returned to the office where Tuppence immersed herself in an A.B.C.

"Paddington twelve o'clock. Torquay three thirty-five. That's the train and le Marchant's friend, Mr. Sago, or Tapioca or something, saw her there about tea time."

"We haven't checked his statement, remember," said Tommy. "If, as you said to begin with, le Marchant is a friend of Una Drake's he may have invented this story."

"Oh, we'll hunt up Mr. Rice," said Tuppence. "I have a kind of hunch that Mr. le Marchant was speaking the truth. No, what I am trying to get at now is this. Una Drake leaves London by the twelve o'clock train, possibly takes a room at a hotel and unpacks. Then she takes a train back to town arriving in time to get to the Savoy. There is one at four forty gets up to Paddington at nine ten."

"And then?" said Tommy.

"And then," said Tuppence, frowning, "it is rather more difficult. There is a midnight train from Paddington down again but she could hardly take that, that would be too early."

"A fast car," suggested Tommy.

"H'm," said Tuppence. "It is just on two hundred miles."

"Australians, I have always been told, drive very recklessly."

"Oh, I suppose it could be done," said Tuppence. "She would arrive there about seven."

"Are you supposing her to have nipped into her bed at the Castle Hotel without being seen? Or arriving there explaining that she had been out all night and could she have her bill, please?"

"Tommy," said Tuppence. "We are idiots. She needn't have gone back to Torquay at all. She had only got to get a friend to go to the hotel there and collect her luggage and pay her bill. Then you get the receipted bill with the proper date on it."

"I think on the whole we have worked out a very sound hypothesis," said Tommy. "The next thing to do is to catch the twelve o'clock train to Torquay tomorrow and verify our brilliant deductions."

Armed with a portfolio of photographs, Tommy and Tup-

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pence duly established themselves in a first-class carriage the following morning, and booked seats for the second lunch.

"It probably won't be the same dining-car attendants," said Tommy. "That would be too much luck to expect. I expect we shall have to travel up and down to Torquay for days before we strike the right ones."

"This alibi business is very trying," said Tuppence. "In books it is all passed over in two or three paragraphs. Inspector Something then boarded the train to Torquay and questioned the dining-car attendants and so ended the story."

For once, however, the young couple's luck was in. In answer to their question, the attendant who brought their bill for lunch proved to be the same one who had been on duty the preceding Tuesday. What Tommy called the ten-shilling-note-touch then came into action and Tuppence produced the portfolio.

"I want to know," said Tommy, "if any of these ladies had lunch on this train on Tuesday last?"

In a gratifying manner, the man at once indicated the photograph of Una Drake.

"Yes, sir, I remember that lady, and I remember that it was Tuesday, because the lady herself drew attention to the fact, saying it was always the luckiest day in the week for her."

"So far, so good," said Tuppence as they returned to their compartment. "And we will probably find that she booked at the hotel all right. It is going to be more difficult to prove that she traveled back to London, but perhaps one of the porters at the station may remember."

Here, however, they drew a blank and crossing to the up platform, Tommy made inquiries of the ticket collector and of various porters. After the distribution of half crowns as a preliminary to inquiring, two of the porters picked out one of the other photographs with a vague remembrance that someone like that had traveled to town by the four forty that afternoon, but there was no identification of Una Drake.

"But that doesn't prove anything," said Tuppence as they left the station. "She may have traveled by that train and no one noticed her."

"She may have gone from the other station, from Torre."

"That's quite likely," said Tuppence. "However, we can see to that after we've been to the hotel."

The Castle Hotel was a big one overlooking the sea. After booking a room for the night and signing the register, Tommy observed pleasantly, "I believe you had a friend of ours here last Tuesday. Miss Una Drake."

The young lady at the desk

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beamed at him.

"Yes, I remember. A young Australian lady, I believe."

At a sign from Tommy, Tuppence produced the photograph.

"That is rather a charming photograph of her, isn't it?" said Tuppence.

"Oh, very nice, very nice indeed, quite stylish."

"Did she stay here long?" inquired Tommy.

"Only one night. She went away by the Express the next morning back to London. It seemed a long way to come for one night, but of course I suppose Australian ladies don't think anything of traveling."

"She is a very sporting girl," said Tommy, "always having adventures. It wasn't here, was it, that she went out to dine with some friends, went for a drive in their car afterwards, ran the car into a ditch, and wasn't able to get home till morning?"

"Oh, no," said the young lady. "Miss Drake had dinner here in the hotel."

"Really," said Tommy, "are you sure of that? I mean, how do you know?"

"Oh, I saw her."

"I asked because I understood she was dining with some friends in Torquay," explained Tommy.

"Oh, no, sir, she dined here." The young lady laughed and blushed a little. "I remember she had on a very pretty frock. One of those new flowered chiffons, all over pansies."

"Tuppence, this tears it," said Tommy when they had been shown upstairs to their room.

"It does rather," said Tuppence. "Of course, that woman may be mistaken. We will ask the waiter at dinner. There can't be very many people here at this time of year."

This time it was Tuppence who opened the attack.

"Can you tell me if a friend of mine was here last Tuesday?" she asked the waiter with an engaging smile. "A Miss Drake, wearing a frock, all over pansies, I believe." She produced a photograph. "This lady."

The waiter broke into an immediate smile of recognition.

"Yes, yes, Miss Drake. I remember her very well. She told me she came from Australia."

"She dined here?"

"Yes. It was last Tuesday. She asked me if there was anything to do afterwards in the town."

"Yes?"

"I told her the theatre, the Pavilion, but in the end she decided not to go and she stayed here listening to our orchestra."

"Oh, damn," said Tommy under his breath.

"You don't remember what time she had dinner, do you?" said Tuppence.

"She came down a little late. It must have been eight o'clock."

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"Damn, Blast and Curse," said Tuppence as she and Tommy left the dining room. "Tommy, this is going all wrong. It seemed so clear and lovely."

"Well, I suppose we ought to have known it wouldn't all be plain sailing."

"Is there any train she could have taken after that, I wonder?"

"Not one that would have landed her in London in time to be at the Savoy."

"Well," said Tuppence, "as a last hope I am going to talk to the chambermaid. Una Drake had a room on the same floor as ours."

The chambermaid was a voluble and informative woman. Yes, she remembered the young lady quite well. That was her picture right enough. A very nice young lady, very merry and talkative. Had told her a lot about Australia and the kangaroos.

The young lady rang the bell about half-past nine and asked for her hot-water bottle to be filled and put in her bed and also to be called the next morning at half-past seven—with coffee instead of tea.

"You did call her and she was in bed?" asked Tuppence.

The chambermaid stared at her. "Why, yes, ma'am, of course."

"Oh, I only wondered if she was doing exercises or anything," said Tuppence wildly. "So many people do in the early morning."

"Well, that seems cast-iron enough," said Tommy, when the chambermaid had departed. "There is only one conclusion to be drawn. It is the London side of the thing that *must* be faked."

"Mr. le Marchant must be a more accomplished liar than we thought," said Tuppence.

"We have a way of checking his statements," said Tommy. "He said there were people sitting at the next table whom Una knew slightly. What was their name—Oglander, that was it. We must hunt up these Oglanders and we ought also to make inquiries at Miss Drake's flat in Clarges Street."

The following morning they paid their bill and departed somewhat crestfallen.

Hunting out the Oglanders was fairly easy with the aid of the telephone book. Tuppence this time took the offensive and assumed the character of a representative of a new illustrated paper. She called on Mrs. Oglander asking for a few details of their "smart" supper party at the Savoy on Tuesday evening. These details Mrs. Oglander was only too willing to supply.

Just as she was leaving, Tuppence added carelessly, "Let me see, wasn't Miss Una Drake sitting at the table next you? Is it really true that she is engaged to the Duke of Perth? You know her of course."

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"I know her slightly," said Mrs. Oglander. "A very charming girl, I believe. Yes, she was sitting at the next table to ours, with Mr. le Marchant. My girls know her better than I do."

Tuppence's next port of call was the flat in Clarges Street. Here she was greeted by Miss Marjorie Leicester, the friend with whom Miss Drake shared a flat.

"Do tell me what all this is about?" asked Miss Leicester plaintively. "Una has some deep game on and I don't know what it is. Of course she slept here on Tuesday night."

"Did you see her when she came in?"

"No, I had gone to bed. She has her own key, of course. She came in about one o'clock, I believe."

"When did you see her?"

"Oh, the next morning about nine—or perhaps it was nearer ten."

As Tuppence left the flat she almost collided with a tall gaunt female who was entering.

"Excuse me, Miss, I'm sure," said the gaunt female.

"Do you work here?" asked Tuppence.

"Yes, Miss, I come daily."

"What time do you get here in the morning?"

"Nine o'clock is my time, Miss."

Tuppence slipped a half crown into the gaunt female's hand.

"Was Miss Drake here last Tuesday when you arrived?"

"Why, yes, Miss, indeed she was. Fast asleep in her bed and hardly woke up when I brought in her tea."

"Oh, thank you," said Tuppence, and went disconsolately down the stairs.

She had arranged to meet Tommy for lunch in a small restaurant in Soho and there they compared notes.

"I have seen that fellow, Rice. It is quite true he did see Una Drake in the distance at Torquay."

"Well," said Tuppence, "we have checked these alibis all right. Here, give me a bit of paper and a pencil, Tommy. Let us put it down neatly the way all detectives do."

1:30	Una Drake seen in Dining Car of train.
4 o'clock	Arrives at Castle Hotel.
5 o'clock	Seen by Mr. Rice.
8 o'clock	Seen dining at hotel.
9:30	Asks for hot-water bottle.
11:30	Seen at Savoy with Mr. le Marchant.
7:30 a.m.	Called by chambermaid at Castle Hotel.
9 o'clock	Called by charwoman at flat at Clarges Street.

They looked at each other.

"Well, it looks to me as if

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Blunt's Brilliant Detectives are beat," said Tommy.

"Oh, we mustn't give up," said Tuppence. "Somebody *must* be lying!"

"The queer thing is that it strikes me *nobody* was lying. They all seemed perfectly truthful and straightforward."

"Yet there must be a flaw. We know there is. I think of all sorts of things like private airplanes, but that doesn't really get us any forwarder."

"I am inclined to the theory of an astral body."

"Well," said Tuppence, "the only thing to do is to sleep on it. Your subconscious works in your sleep."

"H'm," said Tommy. "If your subconscious provides you with a perfectly good answer to this riddle by tomorrow morning, I take off my hat to it."

They were very silent all that evening. Again and again Tuppence reverted to the timetable. She wrote things on bits of paper. She murmured to herself, she sought perplexedly through Rail Guides. But in the end they both rose to go to bed with no faint glimmer of light on the problem.

"This is very disheartening," said Tommy.

"One of the most miserable evenings I have ever spent," said Tuppence.

"We ought to have gone to a Music Hall," said Tommy. "A few good jokes about mothers-in-law and twins and bottles of beer would have done us no end of good."

"No, you will see this concentration will work in the end," said Tuppence. "How busy our subconscious will have to be in the next eight hours!" And on this hopeful note they went to bed.

"Well," said Tommy next morning, "has the subconscious worked?"

"I have an idea," said Tuppence.

"You have. What sort of idea?"

"Well, rather a funny idea. Not at all like anything I have ever read in detective stories. As a matter of fact, it is an idea that *you* put into my head."

"Then it must be a good idea," said Tommy firmly. "Come on, Tuppence, out with it."

"I shall have to send a cable to verify it," said Tuppence. "No, I am not going to tell you. It's a perfectly wild idea but it's the only thing that fits the facts."

"Well," said Tommy, "I must away to the office. A roomful of disappointed clients must not wait in vain. I leave this case in the hands of my promising subordinate."

Tuppence nodded cheerfully.

She did not put in an appearance at the office all day. When Tommy returned that evening about half-past five it was to find a wildly exultant Tuppence.

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"I have done it, Tommy. I have solved the mystery of the alibi. We can charge up all these half crowns and ten-shilling notes and demand a substantial fee of our own from Mr. Montgomery Jones and he can go right off and collect his girl."

"What is the solution?" cried Tommy.

"A perfectly simple one," said Tuppence. "*Twins.*"

"What do you mean—twins?"

"Why, just that. Of course it is the only solution. I will say you put it into my head last night talking about mothers-in-law, twins, and bottles of beer. I cabled to Australia and got back the information I wanted. Una has a twin sister, Vera, who arrived in England last Monday. That is why she was able to make this bet so spontaneously. She thought it would be a frightful rag on poor Montgomery Jones. The sister went to Torquay and Una stayed in London."

"Do you think she'll be terribly despondent that she's lost?" asked Tommy.

"No," said Tuppence. "I don't. I gave you my views about that before. She will put all the kudos down to Montgomery Jones. I always think respect for your husband's abilities should be the foundation of married life."

"I am glad to have inspired these sentiments in you, Tuppence."

"It is not a really satisfactory solution," said Tuppence. "Not the ingenious sort of flaw that Inspector French would have detected."

"Nonsense," said Tommy. "I think the way I showed these photographs to the waiter in the restaurant was exactly like Inspector French."

"He didn't have to use nearly so many half crowns and ten-shilling notes as we seem to have done," said Tuppence.

"Never mind," said Tommy. "We can charge them all up to Mr. Montgomery Jones. He will be in such a state of idiotic bliss that he would probably pay the most enormous bill without jibbing at it."

"So he should," said Tuppence. "Haven't Blunt's Brilliant Detectives been brilliantly successful? Oh, Tommy, I do think we are extraordinarily clever. It quite frightens me sometimes—it really does."

"The next case we have shall be a Roger Sheringham case and you, Tuppence, shall be Roger Sheringham."

"I shall have to talk a lot," said Tuppence.

"You do that naturally," said Tommy. "And now I suggest that we carry out my program of last night and seek out a Music Hall where they have plenty of jokes about mothers-in-law, bottles of beer, *and twins.*"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 349th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . an exceptional "first story," filled with suspense and a growing sense of terror . . .

The author, Dr. Richard A. Selzer, has told us little about himself. At the time of this writing he is a 41-year-old surgeon practicing in New Haven, Connecticut. He has a wife and three children for (as he expresses it) "comfort, comedy, and comeliness (assign the nouns as it may strike your fancy). He has had "a life-long envy of the purveyor of the printed word" (note the professionalism indicated), and in his next life he "would like to be a tenor and say everything in high B flat" (cryptic and provocative) . . .

We hope to publish more of this extremely promising writer's work . . .

A SINGLE MINUTE OF FEAR

by RICHARD A. SELZER

SHE HAD SAT WRENLIKE ON the edge of an old ladderback chair—small, thin, white-haired, with blue eyes and a startlingly youthful voice. It had struck him that if he had heard that voice without seeing her he would have expected a young girl. The voice was clear, light, with a bit of boldness in it. For an instant he had a vision of a beautiful young girl imprisoned in an old woman's body.

"Yes, it is a big house, I suppose, but it's home," she was saying. "I was born here and never lived anywhere else. From up here on the hill you can see the lights on the water in the harbor. Come, I'll show you."

They walked up the curving staircase to the library. From the window the lights far below darted and zipped, like phosphorescent bugs. It was so quiet. That was what he liked best—he could

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study here, undisturbed. Warren was older than the other students and needed to regain the discipline of studying. Five years of solitude in the Forestry Service had depleted his drive. Passive and shy at his return to the world, he needed the isolation he saw here.

When they returned to the living room she had said, her blue eyes pale and unswerving, "Of course, no girls in the house. And no liquor."

"May I smoke?"

"In your room."

They arranged for him to work out his rent in chores, giving her eight hours of work each week. She always took in Forestry students, she said. "They understand hedges and grass. You really can't get much out of a Classicist." She had made that mistake once and that year had ended up hiring a gardener.

His room was on the third floor, really more than he had hoped for. The walls were dark walnut, rather somber, but less distracting than wallpaper. There was a bathroom with ancient porcelain fixtures and a naked bulb at the end of a string. One window was darkened by the middle branches of a pine tree. The other window looked down over the steep curving drive of the private road.

He had meant to keep his distance, do his chores, and stay in his room. For a while it worked out that way, and days would go by when he wouldn't see her. Once or twice, while mowing or raking on the grounds, he had the feeling he was being watched, but when he turned to look up at the house all the windows were blank.

Then one night she met him at the door.

"Won't you have dinner with me tonight?"

"Yes, thank you, Mrs. Pierson. I can't stay long, I have so much to do, but I'd like it very much." He was downstairs at six and went to the kitchen.

"Sit down in the dining room and I'll serve in a minute."

At dinner they had talked of many things. She was an aggressive conversationalist, initiating each subject and asking questions. She seemed far more interested in his history than in recounting her own. "Not quite in character," he thought. He was pleased, nevertheless, and enjoyed telling her of his experiences in the Forestry Service.

At the end she said, "I'm glad you're here, Warren. I feel safe. These days it's not good for an old woman to live alone in a big house. There are too many burglars."

After that first dinner he found himself spending more and more time in her parlor. It became a matter of course that they would eat dinner together. Warren reluc-

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tantly admitted to himself that he enjoyed her company. Actually she knew many things and could talk intelligently on a number of subjects, from jury duty to conservation. Unlike other women he had known, she had an earnestness, an open strength of mind, that appealed to him. After the years of solitude he relished her company and, no less, the semblance of family life that she offered.

After his classes he did not adjourn to the coffee shop with the other students but went home, more and more eagerly, and always with a sense of impending comfort. There was the night she talked of her father.

"He was a hunter—not great, but certainly avid." She smiled in nostalgia. As for herself, she admitted a reluctance to shoot animals for sport. "In fact, after he died, I removed stuffed birds and beasts from every mantel and cabinet in the house, and put them in the attic. Why, there was even a great horned owl on the piano, if you please. No wonder I hated to practise, with those reproachful eyes on me. Would you like to see his gun collection?"

"I would indeed, Mrs. Pierson. I know a bit about guns myself."

"I'm sure you do. Well, after dinner I'll show them to you."

Later she unlocked a large breakfront in the library and he took one gun after another from its rack, feeling the polished barrels, the rich wood. They still had a faint odor of oil about them. She stood aside and watched him expertly cock a rifle. She seemed immensely pleased at his excitement.

"There are boxes and boxes of shells of all sizes in the drawers. See?"

She opened a drawer and he noted the carefully labeled, neatly stacked boxes.

"Have you ever shot a gun?" he asked her.

"Heavens, no! I'm not strong enough for that."

"It doesn't take much strength if you know how. Some day I'll show you."

"I'd love to watch you shoot. There's plenty of room on the back lawn."

"Good. I'll set up a target and we'll have some fun."

What had started as a game quickly assumed a more and more central focus in the time they spent together. They would meet in the library and after a brief consultation at the gun cabinet would walk together down the great staircase to the back of the house.

One day she said, "May I try?" There was timidity in her voice.

He had stood behind her. It was all so gentle. Outside, on the far end of the lawn, in front of a cluster of copper beeches, the targets he had set up stared up

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at them like bloodshot eyes. His left hand helped her support the weight of the rifle, his right guided her eye to the sight, her finger to the trigger.

"Now," he had whispered in her ear. The tiny body jerked once beneath his steadying grasp, but remained straight, defiant, before the recoil. She learned quickly. He felt all the pride of the trainer, the tamer of beasts, the drawer forth, the realizer of potential. She was elated at her progress, ran to examine the target, and kept her score with a scrupulousness that was almost fanatical.

At dinner they talked of guns and bullets.

"I must learn to protect myself," she said. "An old woman like me all alone. There are burglars throughout the neighborhood. They know we're helpless. Now we can fight back, can't we, Warren? Thanks to you, we can give a good account of ourselves."

She seemed then to imagine the very confrontation itself, and discovery of the intruder, the gun raised, the breathless moment of aiming, the report, the impact, the stung body's crumple and fall.

"Well, I doubt you'll ever need to use it," laughed Warren. "I suppose it doesn't hurt a bit to let them know you've been target-practising. But it's fun."

"Yes, it is," she said, with a voice that seemed not to have finished the sentence . . .

Warren had lived in Mrs. Pierson's house for eight months. It was November and the big house seemed darker than ever. After five o'clock in the evening there was virtually no light from the outside.

For the past few weeks he had been increasingly restless, bored. His rehabilitation at school was complete. He was tired of the old lady's company now, tired of her constant talking of guns and shooting. She was obsessed with it. He began to get home later and later in the afternoon. Often it was too late and too dark for any practise, and on those days she seemed quieter, not glum but disappointed, and he ate quickly and went upstairs to study.

There was a girl who worked as a secretary in the Forestry School, and he had begun to watch her. One day she sensed his gaze, looked up, and smiled. For Warren that smile was a kind of liberation. They had talked, eaten lunch together, and he had taken her to the movies. Later he had kissed her, feeling the warm sweet-smelling body through her thin blouse. From then on he was with Paula every day.

"I won't be home for dinner tonight, Mrs. Pierson."

"Why? Is anything wrong?"

"No, I—I have some work to do in the library." Somehow he couldn't tell her about the girl.

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She had looked at him for one moment extra.

"We'll have coffee when you come home, then."

"I think I'll be too late tonight. Thanks, anyway."

That was the first time. In the beginning he would tell her each morning that he wouldn't be home for dinner, but when it happened every day he stopped telling her. The more he saw of Paula—and that "more" had developed into a love affair, his first—the less he saw of Mrs. Pierson.

For the past week he had merely lived there in the big dark house. They had not had occasion to speak and he tried to avoid her when possible, waiting until he heard her in the kitchen before he came quickly downstairs and ran out the front door. He felt a certain guilt in the abrupt way he had terminated their relationship, but it only bothered him when he saw her standing, tiny and silent, at the library window upstairs. The rest of the time he did not think about it.

And now tonight. He had left Paula at six o'clock. They had arranged to meet at ten for a beer. As he walked up the long steep driveway he thought he saw Mrs. Pierson at the library window. He looked again, but saw nothing.

He was stopped in his tracks by the sound of the shot and the spray of pebbles that kicked up not five feet in front of him. He was nailed to the spot. Raising his hand to shield his eyes he peered up at the dark house. Another shot rang out, and the paved driveway bore a gouge several feet to his left.

Galvanized, he ran half crouching to the safety of the garage. Now she could not see him. He knew it was she, beyond any doubt. He unlocked the door of the garage that led to the basement and went inside. "I've got to get to her," he thought, "before she hurts herself. Crazy old bitch. I'll sneak up behind her and grab the gun. Then out I go, out of here permanently."

He noted that the house was in complete darkness, and thought, "Better not turn on any lights." He crept up the back stairs to the kitchen, flattening along the wall, then into the great hall and up the curving staircase. It was completely dark and utterly quiet. At the door to the library he stopped. The shots had come from there.

Should he run in, flick on the light, and rush her? Or creep in on the floor? He slipped off one shoe, and stepping well out of range, threw it into the library. There was a resounding crack and zing which echoed for a few moments. His skin crawled with tension.

The gun cabinet! He had to reach it and get a rifle. He had

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to meet her on more equal terms, so that if she were truly insane or wouldn't talk to him, if worse came to worst he could shoot, not to kill but to disarm.

The gun cabinet was at the far end of the room, near the back entrance to the library. A frontal assault was out of the question. Retreating, he slipped off the other shoe and threw it into the library. There was another shot, followed by the tinkle of shattered glass. At the same time he raced lightly and silently through a side hall to the other entrance of the library. The cabinet was now no more than three feet away.

He dropped to his haunches and inched his stockinged feet toward the cabinet. For what seemed an hour he crouched there, staring out into the blackness, then reached up to try the glass cabinet door. It was open! He had thought to quickly smash it and snatch a weapon through the broken glass. He knew which ones were already loaded. She must have forgotten, in her nervousness, to close and lock the door.

"Take one," came the youthful voice.

He froze.

"Take one. I won't shoot while you're there."

He waited. His eyes were accommodating to the darkness and he saw her as a small mound of blackness between the large windows in the far wall. He reached for a rifle and quickly slid it from the cabinet. An open box of shells stood on the lower shelf, and he took a handful and dropped to the floor. Crablike, he scuttled backward to the doorway and out of the room. No sooner had he left the library than two shots in quick succession flew across the room. He heard the glass of the gun cabinet shatter.

"Please, Mrs. Pierson, this is crazy. Can't we stop and talk about it? Someone can get hurt."

He tried to keep it light, give her a chance to quit, laugh, agree that it was only a game, and that it was now time to stop and have dinner. She answered with a shot that cracked at the other end of the dark room, spending itself in metallic echoes. Warren knelt at the turn of the hall leading out of the library.

"You need help, Mrs. Pierson. You're sick. Come on, put down the gun. Come out where I can see you. I won't shoot and I won't hurt you. I'll get you a doctor, and when you get well we'll forget the whole thing."

His voice was too loud, he knew, but it was hard to control. He was frightened.

"Mrs. Pierson," he called "Please. Mrs. Pierson, let's stop this. Calm yourself. Why are you doing this? Why do you want to kill me? You're upset, and maybe I—I don't blame you. But surely

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we could talk about it."

A pause. "Can't we?" There was no answer. "Look, Mrs. Pierson." He made his tone firm, slightly menacing. "If it comes to that, you can't outshoot me. I taught you a lot but not everything." And then more gently, "I don't want to hurt you. Answer me, damn it!" he shouted. Still no answer. "Okay, that's it."

He hated her now, hated her for frightening him, threatening him. Hated her as much as she must hate him. He could feel her hatred and his own like two dark clouds filling the house, insinuating poisonous strands into each other's substance. It amazed him how immediately hatred arose, full-grown. All it took was a single minute of fear. Good lord, how he hated her now!

What had she expected? A lasting emotional attachment? Warren could not imagine the basis for her desire to possess him. All right, they had both been lonely, but that was certainly not new to her, and he had honestly enjoyed her company. At what point did reason and propriety snap? When did she announce, in silent authority, her ownership of him? It was only thwarted possession that could produce such a murderous jealousy. Even now the irony of having been the instrument of his possible destruction did not escape him.

Maybe there was time to get out of the house. He rose halfway and backed into the side hall. A shot. He ducked and fled into the library again, coming out the front entrance. Good! She had gone down the side hall, thinking he was still there. He crossed the hall and raced into a bedroom. He knelt there next to the doorway, rifle ready. At the very first sound he was going to shoot. Maybe that would scare her and make her surrender.

He stared out into the blackness; then, on the other side of the stairwell, he saw the dim shape floating toward him. He raised the gun to his shoulder, took aim at a point just behind the shape, and fired. She did not so much as start or change her speed.

"I've got to get out of here or get her." He rose to his feet, fired two shots in the direction of her shape, then plummeted down the stairs to the first floor. As he reached the bottom he heard the crack of a rifle and simultaneously felt a breathtaking pain in his left hip. There was a moment of terror, when he wanted to slump to the floor and give in to his wound; but steeling himself he plunged on, feeling his trousers grow warm and wet from the blood.

He was sweating heavily. That shot had been too close for comfort. She couldn't be that good, she couldn't. He was forced to

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admit that she had improved a great deal in the last weeks of their practising. The thought crossed his mind for the first time: What if she gets me? True, he was a better shot, but she knew this house. It was like an extension of her own body. For over sixty years it had surrounded her like a carapace. Surely that would count in her favor.

"Don't be careless, Warren," he thought.

He had never wanted to kill anything so much as he wanted to kill her. The hate was like a hot branding iron in his head. He twisted and clenched to contain it, but each minute that it went unslaked was torture. He felt his brain draw itself together like an animal, grow dark and concentrated, sitting poised on the floor of his skull, ready to spring. Was he to pay for a lifetime of her spinsterhood?

"The bullet didn't hit the bone, or I couldn't run," he reasoned.

He raced across the open expanse of the living room into the solarium. This was a long narrow room with a French door at each end. It was completely windowed, and full of plants. He flattened against a wall and waited for her. He knew now that he would have to shoot—to shoot to kill. And he wanted to kill her.

Then he knew she was there, in the room with him, at the other end. He could not see her but her presence was palpable. He had to kill her with the first shot or she would kill him by learning the origin of his blast. His hip was throbbing unbearably, and his right sock was sticky with blood. He had to kill her soon.

From where he crouched, Warren watched with mounting alarm as slowly, icily, the moon slid across the windows, frosting the dark leaves of the plants with a sinister shine. Here and there on the walls, tapers of its cold glare threatened to dilute the thick darkness to a vulnerable dusk. In another moment he would be revealed.

Then suddenly, absurdly, the telephone rang. His muscles jumped in fright, making his hip throb anew. It rang again and again and then again. In the middle of the fourth ring it stopped and he heard the youthful voice say, "Hello?"

Lurching forward he fired shot after shot in the direction of the telephone. It stood on a small table at the other end of the solarium. When he stopped, another shot screamed into his ear, hard, grating at first, then purifying into a single silver sound that filled his head.

"My God, she's at the other phone."

From the extension in the living room he heard, or thought he heard her say, "Police—hurry. I've just killed a burglar."

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THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

What *does* intrigue readers? Several months back, when copy for November's column lay on my desk before being sent, a friend wandered in, glanced at the pages, and, when I nodded assent, settled down and read them. Something seemed to fascinate him. Once he got up to consult a work of reference, but immediately returned for further study. At length I learned what had so engrossed his attention.

"Did Adam Smith," he asked, "really call Dr. Johnson a son of a bitch? Now Dr. Johnson (I've just looked him up) died in 1784; Adam Smith died in 1970. Did they use the word as long ago as that?"

Yes; this delicate term is old English. Partridge's monumental *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* cites an instance from the very early eighteenth century. And you will find it used throughout the novels of Tobias Smollett, who died in 1770.

Once, long ago, I wondered. During years' residence in England I had never heard it from an Englishman. Since both Adam Smith and Tobias Smollett were Scots, could theirs have been a *verbum horrendum* common only north of the Tweed? Then I remembered reading how William Hazlitt, as English as roast beef, described somebody who had offended him.

"That son of a bitch!" Hazlitt said.

O.E.D. The fine old epithet has never died; it was merely in abeyance before its renaissance by American troops during World War II. When it comes hurtling off the screen today, as with the uninhibited speech of the late General George S. Patton, in the remotest corner of Britain they will understand.

I tell no rambling anecdote. For most of this month the new books arriving here have been so bad as to provoke comment as uninhibited as General Patton's. But ill-temper must not sway judgment. Fairness forbade me to fill up space by calling the authors of these books what Adam Smith called Dr. Johnson. They had

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every good intention; they lacked nothing except skill.

As deadline drew nearer, it seemed that all titles for review must be classics of the past. Following *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes,* discussed in '69, the next choice was inevitable. And then what?

Even while I pondered, on successive days the postman brought two new books so worth your notice that they can well support the single classic already chosen. Though the ideal number would have been three new ones, that single classic is a multibook masterpiece. And my stay of execution had arrived in time.

The Father Brown Omnibus, by G. K. Chesterton (Dodd, Mead, $6.00), contains all five volumes of the little cleric's detective saga, *The Innocence of Father Brown* (1911), *The Wisdom of Father Brown* (1914), *The Incredulity of Father Brown* (1926), *The Secret of Father Brown* (1927), and *The Scandal of Father Brown* (1935), and one tale, "The Vampire of the Village," belonging to none.

Even apart from the wit, charm, and vividness of G. K.'s style, for sheer ingenuity these stories stand alone. His mastery of the 'sealed room'—murder of disappearance, apparently against nature, when the room is locked, guarded, or inaccessible—can still fire the imagination of one who first read Chesterton in youth. Beginning with "The Secret Garden" and "The Wrong Shape," other readers may remember "The Arrow of Heaven," "The Oracle of the Dog," "The Miracle of Moon Crescent."

But he had no need of sealed rooms to project miracle after seeming miracle: among others "The Invisible Man," "The Hammer of God," "The Salad of Colonel Cray," "The Dagger with Wings," "The Song of the Flying Fish," "The Red Moon of Meru," each naturally explained. In "The Chief Mourner of Marne," no less than in "The Honor of Israel Gow," he showed that the most irrational outward behavior can have very sane cause. All this he did with strict fair play, before fair play had become an article of faith among honest men.

He used one recurring theme, mistaken identity from our own mistaken notions: that a millionaire industrialist must wear every air of command, or that a romantic poet will resemble Lord Byron. And sometimes he erred; in an otherwise fine story, "The Man in the Passage," he gave his famous actress a male dresser. Though this poor devil was secretly the lady's husband, it would have been too much even for the world of the theatre, where anything goes.

If of Father Brown himself we learn very little, not even his first name, we know that we like J. Brown almost as much as

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we like J. Brown's creator. Gilbert Keith Chesterton, incredible though it may seem, has been dead for almost thirty-five years. He was the last magician. We shall not look upon his like again.

Victorian Studies in Scarlet, by Richard D. Altick (W. W. Norton, $7.95), is both factual and absorbing; don't miss it. In addition to exploring Britain's taste for fictional murder during the reign of the Good Queen, Professor Altick has dealt at some length with the great *causes célèbres* of the courts.

Here is Charles Peace, good old Charley, the fiddling killer round whom so many myths have gathered. Here is squint-eyed Neill Cream, another homicidal doctor, as well as Severin Klosowski, alias George Chapman, the publican with the unlucky wives. Here are several tragic heroines of yesteryear, who stood trial but escaped the rope.

Madeleine Smith, sexually enlightened Glasgow socialite in 1857, probably did give arsenic to her sanctimonious French lover. However, since he had been trying to blackmail a wealthy girl into marriage, the jury awarded Madeleine that Scots verdict, 'not proven,' which lawyers call 'not guilty, but don't do it again.'

There is more doubt whether French-born Adelaide Bartlett, '86, poured chloroform down the throat of her sleeping husband; a star performance by counsel won her acquittal. There is most doubt about our own Florence Maybrick, the lady from Alabama. Sentenced to death in '89 for poisoning *her* husband at Liverpool, Mrs. Maybrick had it commuted to life, did fifteen years before returning to America, and survived until past the outbreak of Hitler's War.

More deeds of blood loom in every corner. Professor Altick is an engaging guide with a wry, quizzical sense of humor. You will enjoy his companionship through the maze.

I am left with little space adequately to praise *Ellery Queen's Grand Slam* (World, $6.95), the twenty-fifth of his annual anthologies. But, despite one or two items so tenuous that they scarcely qualify as stories, your favorite editor has compiled nothing better in his long career.

Let prejudice speak. My concern is with who and how; seldom with why. Therefore, in one person's opinion, the prize should go to the very first story, "Murder Offstage," a short-short by Edward D. Hoch; Satan himself could be proud of its ingenuity.

Praise cannot end there. We have sterling efforts from Christianna Brand, Stanley Ellin, Margery Allingham, Alan K. Young, and almost everyone else. Dip in anywhere; you don't often go wrong with E.Q.

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There are detective-story locales that are hard to resist—mainly, we suppose, because they lend themselves so well to interesting crime situations. One such background is that of a school, any school from prep to college; another is the countryside as opposed to city streets. Somehow you don't really expect murder on a farm, so when it comes there is an added shock. "But let the fox venture out"—and you will run to escape . . .

FOX AND GEESE

by ROBERT S. ALDRICH

DO COUNTRY SCHOOL KIDS, I wonder, still play "fox and geese" in the snow? At recess you tramped out the shape of a big wheel in the playground. Somebody was the fox and the others were the geese. As long as the fox stayed at the hub of the wheel there was no danger to the geese, but let the fox venture out on one of the spokes and, with much screaming, you ran to escape . . .

I remember the wet snow in my overshoes and the cold wind freezing my face and the girls' shrieks, the groans of dismay when old Holly the janitor rang his tinny bell and brought us in. And I remember that winter when we first heard the words "murder" and "trial" and suddenly there was another kind of game—but still a game of "fox and geese" in the snow . . .

Abner Kennicott was one of our more prosperous farmers. His 480-acre farm was a good deal bigger than most of the others around Woodstown. He was a shrewd man, self-educated but smart in the way of a man with a strong will. People deferred to him. Even my father, at the bank, seemed (or so I imagined) a little subdued in Kennicott's presence, though Father was not a man to humble himself to anybody.

It was Kennicott's appearance and manner, as much as his wealth and influence, that had this effect on people. He was a big man, well over six feet. Other big men could be jovial and friendly and make you feel good, but I do not remember ever hearing Kennicott laugh. A square-faced man, grim of expression, he had a loud deep voice that

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rose a pitch when it was lifted in anger. The truth was, people didn't like him much, though they took care to conceal their feelings.

When he came into one of the three grocery stores, the merchant would drop you, even if you were anxious for your sugar and sliced bacon. It was "Evenin', Mr. Kennicott," and everyone (it seemed to me) stood motionless for a second or two, like figures in a painting, while Kennicott's big shaggy head tilted back to peer at us in a kind of silent disapproval. There was something in his glance that made people step aside.

After his wife Myra left him suddenly—she could no longer take his abuse, the neighbors said—he had more frequent bursts of bad temper. I don't recall witnessing any of these displays, but I remember Father telling about them. He'd shake his head and say that Abner Kennicott was even harder to get along with these days. Once Father came home from the bank, his face flushed, and told Mother he'd had all he could do to keep from punching Kennicott's nose right there in his office. Father was a lawyer as well as a banker.

"He wants his way about everything," Father complained, "and we're all supposed to hop, skip, and jump for him. I tried to tell him that we've all got to give a little, not be so blamed hard and tough. He just gave me that cold stare of his. I don't think he knew what I was talking about."

Everybody knew that Kennicott was "land hungry" and that it stuck in his craw he couldn't buy up the rest of the section. Young Fred Muller owned the family farm now and he had no idea of selling, certainly not to Abner Kennicott. There had been some hostile feeling between Abner and Fred's father. After Bill Muller died, Kennicott didn't try to patch things up. It wasn't his way to make an effort.

Ada Manson kept house for Kennicott. After his wife's sudden disappearance people gossiped about Ada going on living there in the same house. She was rather a handsome woman, grown a bit to plumpness, and the regular tongue-cluckers in Woodstown liked to imagine something between them. But it was hard to think of Ada Manson as anything but an old-maid housekeeper. And in any event Kennicott soon gave them something new to talk about.

It had been several years since Myra Kennicott left. He had made every kind of search for her, enlisting Father's help to get in touch with various authorities, but they had found no trace. It was presumptuous of him to marry again; he would surely have been in trouble had Myra suddenly turned up. Apparently Kennicott

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assumed he was free. So you can imagine the wagging of tongues when he brought his new wife to that big white house up the cottonwood lane. It was a typical squarish boxlike farmhouse with tall windows, the blinds perpetually drawn against the sun. White-faced cattle milled in their pens not far away, the smell coming on the breeze through the bedroom windows. I wondered what Louise—her Christian name was all we knew of the new bride at first—thought of the smell, and of getting up early to help with the milking and the chickens. Because she was no farm girl, that was soon plain. What she was, or had been, was the subject of much speculation.

Naturally, too, people wondered how she and Ada Manson would get along, or if Ada would decide to quit. Any woman as set in her ways as Ada was not likely to surrender control of the household.

We saw Kennicott's wife when she came into town, with her husband driving his mud-spattered car, or sometimes driving in herself, with Ada along. She was a good many years younger than Kennicott. She was slimly attractive, with dark brown eyes and hair. Her laugh was a trifle boisterous but otherwise she seemed almost shy. There were rumors, probably stemming from the hired men Kennicott kept on the place, that she liked to sleep late—scandalous for a farm wife. There were other, darker rumors, some saying she'd had a shady reputation in the city. But Father put no stock in that. He'd learned she'd been a clerk in an office where Kennicott made some of his commission deals.

There was no welcoming party, no invitations to come and meet the bride. As far as Kennicott was concerned, he might have bought a new tractor or repainted his barn. The women who asked her to call were ignored. Kennicott didn't want any barriers taken down: he continued to keep his private life to himself.

Louise must have felt the prying eyes as she went about shopping on our main street. Whether she loved Kennicott or had married him out of some dream of security, no one really knew.

It was just about the time of his marriage that Kennicott began a new campaign in his effort to persuade Fred Muller to sell his farm. He needed legal help and to placate him Father agreed to try to make Fred listen to Kennicott's offer. But I could tell that Father was troubled by his part in this. He liked Fred Muller, as most everyone did, and I expect Father was divided between the thought of a nice fee and his conscience. For Abner made it plain he wanted the Muller farm

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at any cost. He acted, Father said, as if Fred were a squatter on his own land. He even got upset when Fred began clearing timber from his woods, as if he ought to have asked Kennicott's permission.

This unbending desire of Kennicott's to have the whole section was based, so far as anyone knew, on nothing more than pride. For the Muller farm, though a good enough piece of land, was crossed with long angling woods, forbidding in winter, and with scrubby, unusable patches of brush where cattle were always getting lost. He wanted the place partly for the creek water, Kennicott explained, for irrigation; but people said that was just an excuse, because there were good wells on his own place. Land-hungry, that was it, pure and simple.

Kennicott had always found little ways to annoy Fred Muller. They had never agreed on fences or responsibility for strayed stock or anything else. But now in his sullen bitterness Kennicott was starting to act like some old land hog of the frontier. An enraged Muller went to see the Sheriff, Jim Watkins, more than once, complaining that a fence had been torn down and stock had strayed off his land, and once, when a cow took sick, that one of Fred's wells had been p o i s o n e d. Whatever was or wasn't true, the hostility between the two men was rising to a feverish point.

What did the bride from the city think of all this? It was hard to tell. Mother had met Louise Kennicott a few times at social gatherings and had tried to make her feel welcome. Perhaps Louise didn't understand the depth of the struggle between her husband and Fred Muller or the way her husband was regarded. She may have felt trapped in the big white house, having second thoughts about her marriage. But that was just guesswork. We only knew what occurred, striking as suddenly as a winter storm.

It was early February. There had been snow off and on since Christmas—the ground covered with white, then clearing again, only to be followed by another storm. Then it thawed for several days, with the sun bright; for a week we shed our jackets going to school. There was a warm Sunday, then Monday morning was gray and cold and snow fell, light at first, turning soon to thick heavy flakes. Sleds were brought out and voices sounded metallic in the cold air. I had a shoveling job after school.

It was well after midnight when our telephone rang and Father got out of bed to answer. Sheriff Watkins thought he would want to know: Abner Kennicott was dead. He'd been found in his barn, a pitchfork driven deep into his chest.

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"Fred Muller was there to see him." Father sounded worried. "It seems Louise and Ada heard them quarreling, out there in the barn."

"Oh, no," said Mother. "You don't mean—"

"I'd better go," Father said. I asked to come along and he agreed absently. Mother made me put on an extra sweater and thick wool socks, for the temperature had dropped fast.

The Kennicott barnyard was electrified and all the lights were on when we got there. These plus auto headlights made a scene almost as bright as daylight. There were half a dozen cars and a county ambulance blinking a red light. The Sheriff had found a long length of rope and some sawhorses and had roped off the wide white slope leading to the barn, not wanting more tracks added to those he had already found.

Louise Kennicott looked small and pale, her cheeks tearstained. Ada Manson's solid face was a blank, as if she were stunned by what had happened. Despite the crowd there was little noise.

Jennings, the hired man, had found the body. Jennings lived in a small house about a hundred yards beyond the barn. He had been ill with the flu for several days and was just beginning to get about again. He'd been worried about a waterpipe freezing and had gone to have a look, he said. He'd taken a kerosene lantern from a hook in the barn, lit it, and found Kennicott's body there in the straw, the pitchfork sticking straight up.

Sheriff Watkins, along with Father and some other men, spent some time examining the foot tracks in the snow. The new snow had been deep enough to bury the path worn in the old, partly thawed snow, so the tracks had all been made since the last snowfall. Kennicott had made two or three trips from the house, going to the side door of the barn. Then there was another set of prints. They went from the roadway, first to the big door of the barn, then around to the side door. You could see where Fred Muller had left his pickup truck.

"They had a quarrel," the Sheriff said. "Both women heard 'em. Jennings was too far away. He was weak from flu, so I count him out. It took a lot of strength to kill him that way."

"Couldn't it have been an accident?" Father said hopefully. "Maybe he fell from the loft and landed on the pitchfork."

"No," said Watkins flatly, "not with the tines driven into him that way."

"You're convinced it was Muller, then. Have you arrested him?"

"Deputies are bringin' him in."

Father pulled thoughtfully at his lower lip. "Sheriff, a man who

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intended to kill this way would hardly have left his tracks all over in this snow."

"Maybe he didn't intend to. I reckon the quarrel just flared up. No tellin' about that till we have the whole truth. Muller had the motive and the strength, and two witnesses placed him here. I'm eliminating Jennings who was asleep at the time and too far away."

The county men loaded the body into the ambulance and left.

Father spent some more time examining the tracks in the snow. He stooped and tapped the hollows with a stick. I guess he was testing for himself that the low temperature had frozen Kennicott's tracks, though I couldn't see what difference that made.

"You mind if I question Mrs. Kennicott and Ada?" he asked.

The Sheriff nodded. "Go ahead."

But before we could get to the house the deputies drove up. Fred Muller wasn't handcuffed. He appeared under a strain but he smiled pleasantly and shook hands with Father. He admitted he'd spent some time in the barn talking with Kennicott, but denied that there had been a bad quarrel. "We may have raised our voices some," he said. "He was a loud talker anyway."

The Sheriff looked straight at him. "Did you stick that pitchfork in him, Fred?"

"No, sir, I didn't."

"He was all right when you left?"

"Yes. I started home about half an hour after midnight."

"What did you come for, anyway?"

"Let's go in the house," Father interrupted. "No use freezing out here."

We gathered in the comfortable parlor. The two women had composed themselves. Mrs. Kennicott pressed a handkerchief to her eyes and Ada Manson glared stonily. Jennings told again how he'd nearly stumbled over the body, there in the light of his lantern.

He'd been cutting timber, Muller said. It was strange weather to be out working with a power-saw, but he'd decided to clear out most of the woods. He'd been thinking of his troubles with his neighbor, and seeing the lights on at the Kennicott place he'd decided impulsively to drive over and talk with him. He'd intended to stay only a few minutes, but their talk lasted an hour or more. "I tried to make him understand it wasn't just a matter of money," Muller said. "It's my family's farm. Sentiment, I suppose, but I didn't want to let it go. Anyway, he got upset—you know how he was. He'd yell at me, then cool down. I stayed because I figured talking things out might do some good."

"Did either of you threaten

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harm to the other?" Father asked.

"No."

"And you deny that you killed him?" the Sheriff asked.

"I do."

Father asked Fred, "Which way did you leave? I mean, from which door of the barn?"

"The side door."

"You went directly to your truck? You didn't go into the house and speak to either Mrs. Kennicott or Miss Manson?" No, Fred replied; he had gone from the barn directly to his pickup and then driven down the cottonwood lane and on home.

Neither of the women had spoken. Now Ada Manson, her fleshy arms folded and her strong jaw thrust out defiantly, said in a way that sounded startling, "He's lying! Can't you see that? All of this pretending to be so innocent! Well, he don't fool me. He hated Abner and he came here and killed him!"

The Sheriff said calmly, "The evidence looks that way. Still, I don't think this is the time or place to be conducting a trial." That was meant for Father. "I'm putting you under arrest, Fred."

"You're right, Sheriff," Father said. "But you'll agree that we should try to get the facts straight now, while they're fresh in everyone's mind." Seeing that Father wasn't budging from his chair the Sheriff sat down again, and Father turned to Louise Kennicott and asked about her hearing the sounds of a quarrel.

"I heard Abner," she said. "I wasn't sure if they were quarreling. Abner's voice was loud. I went to bed soon after Mr. Muller came. I didn't get up until Ada came to my room and said that Jennings had found Abner."

"That reminds me," Father muttered, and suddenly he shoved his chair back. "Excuse me, please, I'll just be a minute."

He left the room and I heard him open the door that led to the barnyard. The conversation lapsed until he returned, scraping his feet in the hall. He appeared in the parlor. "Thermometer still below freezing," he said. "That electric switch by the back door—it turns on the outdoor lights and the light in the barn?"

"Yes," Louise said.

"I'm kind of curious about one thing." Father took out his pipe and filled it with tobacco. "Fred, after you lunged at Kennicott with the pitchfork, why did you"—he paused, deliberately, and struck a match.

"But I didn't!" Muller said angrily. "I didn't do it!"

"Afterwards, why did you bother turning off the light?"

"I didn't turn off any light. I told you, he was there, alive, when I left."

"But if Jennings is telling the truth, the barn was dark when he went in. He had to light a

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lantern. Somebody had turned the light off in the barn. If it was Kennicott, then we have to assume that you—or somebody—came back and stabbed him in the dark."

As if he were tired of denying guilt, Muller slumped, his hands over his face.

"Maybe it did happen that way," Sheriff Watkins said. "Maybe he pretended to be leaving, then went back and attacked him in the dark."

"No," Louise Kennicott said. "It couldn't have been like that."

Father nodded. "Because there's no light switch in the barn. I just checked. Also, you wouldn't know I'd been to the barn just now if I hadn't told you I was going there. I stepped in the tracks Kennicott made, before they froze hard."

"Well, then who did—?" There was a moment's silence and then the Sheriff said, "Oh!" softly, to himself.

"It was just habit, wasn't it, Ada?" Father said. "A good housekeeper's habit. The thing was done, he was dead. And then you had other things on your mind."

Ada Manson seemed to go limp. Her mouth twisted and she gave a choked sob. "He killed his first wife. Strangled her with a piece of rope. He couldn't put up with her nagging. Afterwards I helped bury her—over there in Muller's woods. We thought nobody would ever find her."

"So that's why he wanted title to the Muller farm," Father murmured.

Ada said, "When Fred started to clear out the woods last fall, Abner was afraid of what he'd find."

"I found it this afternoon," Fred Muller said. "A skeleton. This weather, thawing and freezing again, must have cracked the ground. I went over to Kennicott's, meaning to tell him. But then it struck me that if it *was* his wife, maybe he'd killed her. So I never mentioned it."

There was a moment of silence and then Father, standing by her chair, said, "Why, Ada?"

She said, "It was in Fred's face when I saw him go into the yard. I was sure he'd found her. I was afraid Abner would try to put the blame on me. He couldn't stand it, that I knew—the only one who knew he wasn't what he pretended."

"There was another reason," Father said. "A deeper reason."

"I loved him," she said, in a voice barely above a whisper. "And he brought *her* here."

I couldn't bear to listen any longer. Outside the lights in the barnyard were still on and snow was falling again, clean and silvery against the black night, as if it were trying hard to cover the tracks around the barn.

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Avram Davidson has won the most coveted short-story awards in both his fields—First Prize for his story titled "The Necessity of His Condition" in EQMM's 12th international contest, held in 1956; the Hugo Award for his story, "Or All the Seas with Oysters," considered by a committee of experts the best science-fiction short story of 1958; and the MWA Edgar for "The Affair at Lahore Cantonment," published in the June 1961 issue of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, and judged, also by a committee of experts, the best mystery short story to have appeared in print that year.

Now, here is an Avram Davidson short story that we did not have the privilege of publishing as an original. It is one of Mr. Davidson's most daring conceptions, with an impact that you won't easily recover from—not in these troubled times . . .

THE UNKNOWN LAW

by AVRAM DAVIDSON

"THEN YOU WOULD SAY, SIR, that the United States has no plans for occupying any of the asteroids at all?"

"The United States has no plans for occupying any of the asteroids at all, at the present time. By that I do not mean to say that we have plans for occupation, at any future time. Our action, our policy, in this regard, remains fluid. What we intend to do must continue to take notice of the intentions of the other Space Powers and the decisions of the United Nations."

There was a pause. The President faced the assembled reporters. Then, "Thank you, Mr. President—" The reporters stood up to applaud politely. They faded from view as the 3D wall went blank. A faint bell sounded and a tiny light went on, set in a hood in a far corner of his desk.

The President lifted the hood and took up a cup of the famous green tea which was almost a trademark of his, steaming hot as he liked it. Prior to the campaign, "In public—coffee," his advisors had said. But then came the ugly

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business in Brazil, followed by Colombia coffee pricing itself off the market and other supplies inadequate, followed by the popular *coup d'état* in Formosa which had, for the moment, scarcely anything to sell—except green tea! Formosa was popular, President Smith was popular, coffee wasn't, Byers continued to drink coffee. It wasn't that which had elected Smith, any more than it was hard cider which had elected Harrison almost a century and a half earlier. It had helped, though.

Now he sat, in the privacy of his White House office, and sipped his cup, watching the wall come alive again, this time with open circuit 3D—Steven Senty's bland face and voice giving the inconsequentia of the news.

"—and apropos of the President's comments on the asteroid question it is agreed that the other as yet unfilled Cabinet position will go to millionaire moonestate operator Hartley Gordon, though as yet official confirmation is lacking. Gordon's readiness to bail the party out of the hole that the last campaign left it in hasn't been forgotten. Gordon, however, sees himself as an organizer, not an administrator; privately tells friends he will resign after clearing up the 'mess' the Space Department is now in. Likely successors include ex-diplomat Charles Salem Smith, no relation—" The newscaster smiled; the President made a rude noise. "And Party Stalwart J. T. Macdonald, who gave up a shoo-in chance at his father's old seat in the House to direct President Smith's campaign in the Southeast. Those in the real know say that his chances are better than might be expected."

Roger David Smith made a rude noise again, followed it by a ruder word, drank tea.

"A small but time-honored tradition gets in its once-every-four-years airing this afternoon when three major minor—or minor major, ha, ha—officeholders pay their traditional call to greet the new President in person. Personal visits with a President have become increasingly rare, partly because of security problems: how dangerous they can be was demonstrated by the assassination of President Kennedy and the attempted assassination of President Byers: and partly because of the perfection and improvement of the 3D system. No official basis for this ceremony exists, but the old-time residents of the District like to tell how it originated. Back in George Washington's time.

The wall went blank, the President took another mouthful of unfermented tea, and reflected sourly just how much he hated the "like to tell" locution. Did the faces of old-time residents of

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the District light up when they had the opportunity to tell? Did they chuckle, set up the occasion or opportunity, did—? Oh, well. He looked at his watch. It was just exactly time. He touched his fingertip to the *Ready* button. A bell chimed some rooms away. Pleased, smiling, he repeated this, then three times, fast. Then he frowned in self-reproof, withdrew his hand.

Roger David Smith was 35 years old, just past the minimum age the Constitution sets for the presidency, and had occupied the office for exactly three days and two hours. His dark rugged face, marked with the scars of the shrapnel he had picked up in Sumatra, showed no trace inevitable to the time and place. The new President had not even been born when Calvin Coolidge took two-hour naps every afternoon on the sofa in his office.

Some recollection of this may have been in the President's mind; just before the press conference he had made a teleview call (untapped—the presidential circuit was said to be untappable: he hoped so, but had taken care to keep the conversation innocuous), and a woman's face was still in his eyes and a woman's voice still in his ears—would always be, it seemed—and although poor President Warren Gamaliel Harding had once managed to hide his own cheap amour, the light that beat down unceasingly on whoever held the office was now almost intolerable.

Smith got up from the desk and faced the door just as it opened, just as the Chief Usher's voice announced the callers. He frowned again, slightly, trying to remember just exactly what it was the retiring President had said to him three days ago; quickly erased the frown and let the thought fade. He smiled politely. The smile was not returned.

The three minor major, or major minor officeholders entered, and there was the usual brief seesawing before the order in which they approached the President was decided. Anderson, the Federal Armorer, was first; a square-shaped, ruddy man, with crispy gray hair. After him, the Sergeant-Secretary of the Cabinet, Lovel, tall and bony and pale. Both wore the plaids which were, with their short capes, fashionable for formal but unceremonial occasions. Dressed in the lime-green which psychodynamicists included among the preferred shades for work clothes was Gabrielli, Civil Provost of the Capital, elf-small and moving soundlessly; the President knew that he held the Medal of Honor for his part in the assault on Telukbetung.

Not one of them smiled.

The door closed behind them and after a few seconds the silence was broken by the small noise

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of the door in the outer office being shut.

"Gentlemen," said Roger David Smith, keeping up the little smile, though with difficulty. He extended his hand. Each of the callers took it in turn; still, none smiled. A feeling of unease settled on the President, not great, but definite. Thoughts of other times he had felt it came to him in quick-rushing reflection.

There was the time he had been summoned to see his CO, in Sumatra, near The Rice Paddy, that dreadful summer, expecting to be court-martialed for exceeding his orders; instead he had been commended for quick thinking. There was the time six Party leaders had called on him in his hotel room at the Convention, to tell him (he had been thinking) that he stood no chance after all of being offered the vice-presidential nomination; instead they had asked him to allow his name to go forward for the presidency. And there was the third time, in between the other two, when he had first met the woman to whom he had earlier this afternoon spoken on the teleview. *She doesn't like me,* was his instant thought then. But she had become his mistress after all. She could not become his wife.

"Mr. President," said Anderson, "we have come to ask you to accept our felicitations on your selection as Chief Magistrate of the Republic, and to assure you that we stand, as always, ready to assist you in maintaining the integrity of our national confederation."

In the silence which followed this declaration Smith had time to reflect that it all seemed damned odd. He started to say, "Thank you," but Anderson was speaking again.

"We'll be as brief as we can, sir," he said. "We've made this same declaration to other Presidents, in happier times, in unhappier times, and in times equally unhappy. I've done it on five occasions—I'm acting as spokesman because of seniority in office—Lovel and Gabrielli have done it four times each."

The President of the United States said, "I don't really know—"

"You don't really know what this is all about, sir, do you?" Roger David Smith shook his head. The Federal Armorer nodded, unsurprised. "Except—well, I remember now, just before we left for the inauguration, President Byers told me—let's see—he did tell me you would come here today to tell me something. And he said, 'You'd better believe them, too.' I remember now. I was a little surprised, but there were so many other things on my mind right then. And besides that, only what I've seen in the newspapers and 3D: very little.",

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This was all *damned* odd, he thought. He thought also of his appointments schedule—the Ambassador of the great (and sole remaining) neutral power of the Nether Orient, two Western state governors eager to see what they could do about mustering regional support for the President's program (and even more eager to see what they could do about mustering presidential support for their own putative senatorial campaigns), the American Representative to the U.N.—who, of course, should have been scheduled before the governors, but politics had to go on as usual, no matter what. Even if the "what" be the ever-shaky Condominium of the Moon, the threat of the South American Civil War spreading into Central America, the looming rocketry strike, and—not once and again, but again and again—the matter of the asteroids . . . Still, his appointments secretary had allotted fifteen minutes to these three men. So—

"As I understand it, this tradition began when the first three men to hold your office saved George Washington from an assassination attempt," said President Smith. "And that he promised them that they would have the power to nominate their own successors and to greet every new President on the third day of his term. Isn't that—?"

Anderson asked, "Correct? Not quite, Mr. President."

Smith caught a fleeting resemblance in the older man's face to his own father's. Quickly the thought brought others: his father's insistence, gentle but insistent, when young Smith had failed to make the Space Academy, that he go to law school rather than Paris; then Sumatra, cutting short his legal career before it had really begun; the entry into politics via a local "reform" club; Sarra—

For ten years, almost, everything had been Sarra. Jim, too, of course, but mainly Sarra. The state legislature, the race for the House seat, getting Jim's father to use his great popularity and influence . . . And how had he, Roger David Smith, repaid the old man? By putting horns on his son. Fortunately, the old man never knew. But Jim knew—Jim *must* know. He just didn't care. So—Roger David Smith, here he was: the high school teacher's son, the youngest man ever to sit in the White House. Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, the two Roosevelts, Kennedy and now Roger David Smith. And it was all Sarra. She would have made a damned vigorous President herself, he thought, not for the first time. Only she would never do it, even if it were possible; she'd rather have Jim be elected, had the chance existed,

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and rule through him. Rule? *Reign!*

And, sighing, without being aware that he was sighing, his eye fell on the new asteroid chart they had installed only this morning. White lights for the U.N., blue for the U.S.A., red for the U.S.S.R., and yellow for the disputed ones—ones which were, in American eyes, disputed; the Russians, of course, had a different listing.

His eyes came back to Anderson, his mind recalled Anderson's last comment. " 'Not quite correct?' Your jobs aren't civil service and they're not on the patronage list, either. So—"

Lovel said nothing, bent his long gaunt face a few inches toward his senior, who caught the movement, nodded, and said, "That's true enough, sir, about our being traditionally allowed to nominate our successors. Not exactly true about the assassination thing. Not the *whole* truth."

The whole truth, Anderson went on to say, standing on the rug which a Persian Ambassador had given to Mrs. Grover Cleveland; the whole truth was that during Washington's first Administration, at a time when New York was still the Capital, a great danger toward the nation had arisen, arisen in secret—a cabal, as it was then called. A plot to seize power, to force the new President to follow the direction of a group of men who, alarmed by the radical ideas then emanating from France, intended a more rigorous system of government.

There was evidence, oh, there was evidence in plenty. But it was not evidence that you could bring to court, on which you could base a hope that the matter would be settled swiftly and peacefully.

Delay meant either a successful *coup d'état* and an oligarchy like that of the Venetian Republic—rule by the heads of the great families, secret police, dungeons, and everything hateful and dangerous to liberty-loving Americans—or else full civil war. The nation was new, the nation was young and weak, operating under a Constitution barely tried and largely suspect. British troops still maintained bases on American soil, Spanish armies ringed our Southern and Western borders. French navies were on the seas; and the Indians, still powerful, were everywhere . . .

"I've never heard a word of it," Smith declared. "I'm not sure I believe it. Although—" memory flashed "—is this what President Byers meant when he said I'd better believe you? Because—"

"It's all true, sir," Anderson said. "Great names were involved. Conway's Cabal was nothing in comparison to it. Three men came and brought the evidence before President Washington—they'd

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served under him in the War of the Revolution—they presented him with the evidence on his third day in office. One was the Federal Armorer, William Dickensheet."

"One was the Sergeant-Secretary of the Cabinet, Richard Main," said Lovel.

"The third was Simon Stavers, Civil Provost of the Capital," Gabrielli said.

President Smith stared at them. It hardly seemed possible to remain in doubt of these three men, known to be honorable career men, sober, stable, loyal. But surely they had not come to give him a history lesson? "Go on," he said.

Those three, Anderson continued, discussed the matter a whole night through with President Washington. They debated as to what the right course would be. Speed—as it was counted in those days of slow and difficult transport and communication—speed was essential, if the country was to be spared either a tyranny whose end no man could foresee, or a bloody domestic war. *Wars,* perhaps, and perhaps ending in invasion and conquest and an end to national independence.

Despite the teleview, the luminescents, the model on his desk of the latest moonship, Roger David Smith felt something of that evening so far back—he believed it now, he did believe; it was impossible to doubt those three good men any longer: the archaic formula of their greeting to him (" . . . *our felicitations on your selection as Chief Magistrate . . . we stand, as always, ready to assist you in maintaining the integrity of our national confederation*")—that long-distant night when the Father of his Country, no doubt with his wig set aside and perhaps his famous painful and ill-fitting false teeth as well, debated what move to make and make fast . . . and the candles guttered in the dimness. President Smith had his own problems; the United States of America under the First Administration of President Roger David Smith had its own problems. They were heavy, grave, and great, and no one now spoke of or scarcely dared dream of any "return to normalcy." (The Harding note again!)

He leaned forward, caught up in this account (unaccountably, till now, concealed from him) of the Nation's first crisis under its Constitution. "What did they decide to do?" he asked.

"Immediate contact was made," Anderson said, in the same steady tones he had used throughout, "with those members of the Government who were then in town." He paused. His colleagues nodded slowly, gazing steadfastly at the President. "The leader of the cabal was known,

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his whereabouts were known. It was also known that if he were removed, the scheme would collapse. It was agreed that the welfare of the Nation depended upon—demanded—his removal. He was, accordingly, removed."

"How?"

"The d e c i s i o n was, by pistoling."

Smith half turned his back and struck his fist on his desk.

"Are you trying to tell me," he cried, "that *George Washington* ordered the murder of a man he couldn't convict on a fair trial?" And swung around to face them again.

But they wouldn't admit the word, *murder*. Execution was not *murder*. The slaying of an enemy was not *murder* in time of war. Nor did "war" depend upon a formal declaration. The welfare of the Nation had to be the paramount issue in the eyes of its Chief. The enjoyment of private scruples was a luxury with which he had no right to indulge himself in his official capacity.

"Go on," said Smith.

Could anyone looking back, Anderson went on, doubt that the original decision was the best one? It was obvious even at the time. It had been obvious also that similar situations would a r i s e again—and again and again. It was inevitable. So there grew up a law, he said—and the nods of his colleagues' assents confirmed his words—a law unwritten, but, unlike the so-called "Unwritten law" justifying a husband's killing of his wife's lover, it was an unknown law—unknown except to the fewest possible people—the men who held these three offices, their predecessors, the President, and the former Presidents—but a *law,* nonetheless, authorizing a President to order the death of any person in the country whose existence constituted what was later to be called a "clear and present danger" to the welfare of the Nation.

"My God!" said Roger David Smith. Then—a sudden rush of interest overcoming his shock—he asked, "How in hell did they miss Aaron Burr?"

"He skipped the country too soon. And by the time he came back he wasn't dangerous."

"I see. Well—"

"There have to be limits, of course, Mr. President," t h e Federal Armorer explained. "The President has to declare his intention to us. And he can only do it once. Once in each term of office, that is. Because there have to be limits. There *have* to be—" His voice, for the first time, rose just a trifle.

After a moment, "I see," said the President. "How often—?"

"In the country's history? Seventeen times. Who carries out the decision? One of us. How chosen? By lot. Is there any

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danger of detection? Almost none. Over the course of almost two hundred years," said Anderson, "certain techniques have been developed. Effective ones. How often during our own tenures of office? Once."

President Smith swallowed. "Who is the man who was—killed?"

"That question, sir, is not answered."

"I see. I'm sorry. Of course not. Well, which one of you—"

"And *that* question, sir, is not even asked."

There was silence. *"You'd better believe them,"* former President Byers had said. Was there something of a deeper, personal knowledge in Byers' voice when saying it? Smith could not now remember; the Inauguration, only moments away, had driven anything but bare reception of the words from his mind. He searched his memory; who had died—suddenly—during the previous Administration, whose death might have . . . ?

No name occurred to him. He glanced at the clock set into his desk top at a slant. The fifteen minutes were up. During that fifteen minutes anything might have occurred. Panama invaded by the Continentalists ("South America ends at the northern boundary of Mexico," Lopez-Cardoso was supposed to have said; he was dead now, could neither confirm nor deny it; but his slogan of "One Continent, One People, One Faith, One Destiny" was certainly very much alive); the friendly but unstable government of the Free Cape State overthrown by either Black or White intransigents; another "incident" unfavorably affecting the Lunar Condominium—nothing, it seemed, could affect it favorably any more; further troubles in the still-vexed asteroids: any or even all of these could have occurred in the quarter hour he'd just spent chittering over ancient history.

"Have you anything else to tell me?" he asked, starting forward.

"Only that at least one of us will remain in the District at all times, in case of, well, immediate need, let's say . . . No, sir, nothing else to tell you."

Smith nodded. Anderson glanced at his colleagues. Gabrielli, the most junior of the three in office, spoke for the first time. "Mr. President, we tender you our renewed assurances that we stand, as always, ready to assist you in maintaining the integrity of our national confederation. And we ask your permission to withdraw."

After those three came the Ambassador of the great neutral power of the Nether Orient, equally full of his grave misgivings about American space policy and his grave insistence on increased

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American financial aid to his own country, both couched in the most mellifluous English; and after him came one of the Western American state governors, s l y l y awkward or awkwardly sly, not even knowing the name of the diplomat who had preceded him but knowing just what to offer and just what to demand in the way of political horse-trading. Neither of these two were present in person, of course. And after him—

"What are you doing here, Jim?" the President demanded, frowning. "Governor Millard was supposed to be next; you're not down for an appointment until tomorrow afternoon." He was curt, not so much because he gave a damn about that as because he had been wondering—tired, disgusted, knowing that his impending interview with t h e American representative to the U.N. would bring new problems which neither weariness n o r disgust could ignore—had been wondering if there were a n y chance of his being with Sarra that night.

There was, he had f i n a l l y realized, no chance at all. A President of the United States might sell his country down the river or let it drift down by incompetence, but he could never under any circumstances let it be hinted that he had a mistress. Perhaps ten years ago he might have got away with it, so far had the pendulum swung from the old morality. But there had been one, or perhaps two, scandals too many; now the pendulum was on the far swing again.

James Thackeray Macdonald smiled, waved his hand; Smith fancied he could smell the familiar odor of the man's cigar, but of course it was only fancy—the 3D hadn't got that far yet, despite continual e f f o r t s. There was not the slightest chance in the world of Jim's being any sort of menace in his physical person, but—protocol was protocol. "The day I can't persuade Millard or a thousand yokels like him to trade appointments with me, that's the day I'll close the store and go fishing," Jim said, his ruddy face glowing and cheerful as usual.

"What did you promise him? Off-shore oil rights on t h e Moon?"

Macdonald leaned back in the chair which he had taken, unbidden, and laughed. It was the famous J. T. Macdonald laugh, with rich echoes of his famous father, and, despite everything, Roger David Smith found himself smiling faintly. Jim had charm, if nothing else. And there was damned little nothing else.

"Well, come on, Jim, what the hell do you want?"

J. T. Macdonald smiled indulgently. "Yes, I *know,* Rog;

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okay, I'll make it brief, and then you can let Nick Mason tell you his latest hardluck story about the Rooshians and the Prooshians. Okay. I spoke to Hartley Gordon just a few minutes ago and he told me that he definitely will not stay in office more than three months, not if you offered him Manhattan Island for a nickel. So what I want to know is, how about my taking an undersecretariat now, so I'll be able to step into his shoes without any trouble when he quits?"

The faint smile on the President's face had slipped easily into a frown. Macdonald's appointment to a Cabinet position had been suggested—once, and not by the President, either. J. T.'s name had been, was being frequently mentioned by the media in this connection, however; but speculation of this sort was too common for the President to think it seemed worth even an unofficial denial. He had assumed it would die down. But Jim seemed to be taking it seriously.

"Have you talked about this with Sarra?" Smith asked.

Now the frown was Macdonald's, as faint as the President's smile had been. "Dammit, Rog, I don't have to talk over every little thing with Sarra. I have a mind of my own, you know."

"A Cabinet appointment is no little thing, Jim. I never—no, don't interrupt me—I never promised it to you, I never even suggested it. I know Sarra did mention it, but I never thought you'd think she meant it seriously. Who it was that leaked the fact of your name having been proposed at all I don't know, but I can't be committed by a *leak*, dammit! You have no right, none whatsoever, to treat a lighthearted remark of Sarra's as if it were a promise from me. I am not to be cornered that way. The Secretariat is *out*. And that means, so is an undersecretariat."

Macdonald was still trying to speak, but the President swept on over him. "Besides, as far as I'm concerned, it's been definite for some time now that you would take a position on my personal staff here. Hasn't it? I value your talents, Jim, especially with meeting people face to face, and—"

But Jim wasn't taking the compliment. Thanks for nothing, was his attitude. He had no intention of becoming the presidential Grover Whalen, he said, pinning carnations on visiting dignitaries' wives, and glad-handing prominent Rotarians and Exempt Spacemen from the Middle West, taking them on personally conducted tours of the White House.

"I deserve better than that," he said stormily. "If you hadn't won in the Southeast you wouldn't be here—"

"Yes, you're a good man for

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smoke-filled rooms and rostrums, Jim, as I've just told you: the personal touch. But listen—the Southeast? Don't let's kid ourselves. The strategy there wasn't yours any more than it was mine. It was Sarra's, all the way."

Macdonald uttered a short ugly word. Roger David Smith's head snapped back. "You're talking to the President of the United States," he said.

Macdonald laughed. "No, I'm not. I'm talking to the guy who sleeps with my wife."

Smith stared at him bleakly.

Then he said, "I'm turning you off. Get out of here."

But Macdonald shook his head. "You talk to me or I talk to the press. Okay?" Smith said nothing, continued staring at him. "Okay," Macdonald muttered. What he was going to do, he said, leaning back and taking out a cigar, was to give Rog a little history lesson, free... His expression, as he lit his cigar, raised his eyebrows, darted little glances at the grim-faced man viewing him, and gazed at the smoke as it came swirling from his own pursed lips, was that of an actor in a classical "B movie"—a heavy, who has just announced that he is "going to enjoy this, very much."

"Go ahead," Smith said. "But just remember that while you are getting this off your chest, or wherever the hell you've been keeping it, that the job I have is the most difficult one in the world, and that the world isn't going to stand still for either of us. Now, go ahead."

Jim, who had waved his hand lightly at mention of difficulty, now nodded, puffed at his cigar. After a moment he said, "You've heard, I suppose, of Charles Steward Parnell."

"Parnell? Parnell? The Irish—"

"*That's* the one. Home rule for dear old Ireland. The 1880's, 90's. Well, Parnell had a friend named Captain O'Shea—Willie O'Shea. Ever heard of him? No? Doesn't matter. O'Shea, you see, was useful to Parnell, acted as his confidential agent, took care of difficult matters for him, let his own political career languish in order to help Parnell's . . . And Parnell appreciated it. In fact, he appreciated it so much that he determined to keep O'Shea happy. That is, not exactly *Captain* O'Shea, but *Mrs.* O'Shea. The beautiful Kitty O'Shea. Willie wasn't good enough for her, it would seem. Whether he lacked *looks,* or *glamor,* or whether she couldn't twist him quite so far around her finger as she'd've liked to, who knows. Anyway, whatever it was that Willie didn't have, Smith—oops—Parnell did."

He grinned, lifting his upper lip in front, and glancing sideways at the other man.

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"Did Willie know about it? Oh, you bet your life Willie knew about it. He was nobody's fool. Of *course* he knew about it. Almost right from the start. Why didn't he do anything?" Jim considered his own question, shrugged. "Might be any one of a number of reasons. Maybe Willie didn't think that something was necessarily wrong just because an old book said it was. Maybe Willie *liked* Parnell—maybe he even *loved* Parnell, hmm?—so much that he just didn't *care.* Or—maybe even—maybe Kitty was the kind of woman that no one man could satisfy, hey? Oh, I don't just mean sexually. Maybe she had other desires—power, say. A lust for intrigue, for action, for— And maybe Willie figured that, if there had to be another man, well, he'd rather it was Parnell than anyone else. Could've been any one reason or all."

Roger David Smith continued to stare at him, said nothing. Now and then he raised a hand and stroked the tiny scars on his face. Macdonald took another fleeting look at him and resumed.

"Well, where were we? *Oh,* yes— *'And the song he sang/ Was, "Old Ireland free."'* Well, Home Rule. It was almost all wrapped up, you see. Gladstone was all for it. Ireland was to have its own government at last, with Parnell as Prime Minister. Now, Willie had worked as hard for the cause as any man. And he felt it was time that he had his reward. It was a modest one—a place in Parnell's Cabinet."

After all, what difference did it make who held what Cabinet post? The actual work was always done by underlings, career men, drudges who delighted in details and red tape and hard work.

"Do you see the point, Rog?"

The President nodded. "I see it. And the answer is still 'No.'"

For the first time something like uncertainty flickered across Macdonald's face. "Ah, come on, Rog," he said, almost pleadingly. "You know something? I wouldn't make the worst Space Secretary in the world. I've followed things closely, damned closely. I've read up on it very, ver-ry carefully. I've got ideas which go beyond reorganizing the bookkeeping system, which is about all that Hartley Gordon has in mind, or just sitting tight and hoping that the bogeymen will go away, which is all Salem Smith has in mind."

"You've got ideas?"

Evidently stung by the tone of the questioning voice, Macdonald went from ruddy to red. "Yes, *I've* got ideas," he said. "And a lot of other important people have the same ideas—people whose support you'll damned well be needing." His eyes left the President's face and rested on something in the White House room behind the President; met

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the President's eyes as he returned his gaze; for an instant, fell; then faced him squarely and defiantly. Smith turned his head. There it was—the white, blue, red, and yellow lights of the newly installed asteroid chart.

The President snorted. What would Macdonald do? he demanded. Occupy the asteroids? Was that one of his ideas?

Yes, it was. It certainly was. The U.S.A. was tied hand and foot in one big Gordian knot, he said. The Condominium of the Moon, just look at it? The Russians did just as they damned well pleased, and in return for being let alone they raised every kind of hell imaginable with what the United States was doing. Whenever the United States *did* anything, that is; which was damned seldom . . . too damned seldom.

And Mars? The U.S. had one station on Mars, count them, one; the British had one; the U.N. had two; and the Russians had *four!* The same as all the rest put together. And yet there were people claiming that the single American Mars station was costing too much.

"In a way they're *right,* Rog," Jim said, confidently now, almost cockily. "For a weather bureau, which is about all we use it for, it *is* costing too much. But Rog, if we occupied the asteroids, then Mars Station could be busier than New York! And—rocketry strike? Hell, there'd be so much doing, we could double, triple their pay—the 'teers would be so busy making money they wouldn't have *time* to strike!"

"Uh-huh. And which ones would you occupy? Just the ones we claim? The ones the Russians claim, too? Any unclaimed ones we fancy? Or the whole works, maybe?"

For a moment Macdonald's face hung askew. Then something hateful and ugly entered it. Then he caught control of himself once more.

"How much longer are the American people going to sit still and let the Russians get away with insisting that everything they've already claimed is theirs and that everything they haven't claimed belongs to the U.N.? Where does that leave *us?* The American people—"

Smith got up abruptly, so abruptly that Macdonald jumped.

"I don't know who put you up to this—"

"Nobody put me—"

"I could make a good guess. You can tell them that they picked the wrong cat to try the chestnut game. 'The American people?' Listen, little Jimmy, the American people showed last November what they wanted in the way of leadership, and it wasn't *your* hand that went on the Bible three days ago."

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"You—"

"*Me.* That's right. And I'll tell you something else, I'll give it to you right between the eyes, fellow—even if you didn't have these dangerous ideas you still wouldn't stand a chance at the job. Not a pip in a snowhole. Because without Sarra you're not worth a—"

Scarlet, his cigar fallen unnoticed from his hand, Macdonald on his feet gestured and yammered in incoherent rage.

"My appointing *you,* if you hadn't so obviously sold yourself out, would have meant that *she'd* be the brains of the post. And I don't need her there, I don't want her there."

Now silence fell. Outside, the wet gray afternoon vanished as the exterior lights went on.

"Then it's 'No,'" Macdonald said, very softly. He looked older, he looked genuinely stricken, he looked a little sick.

"It's 'No,' Jim."

Jim nodded. "I'll wait—I'll wait until tomorrow. Just the same. Because—'history lesson.' Parnell said 'No' to Captain Willie O'Shea, too, you see. And then Willie sued Kitty for divorce, naming Parnell as corespondent. He got the divorce. And Parnell got the ax. His party kicked him out. Gladstone backed off on Home Rule. Parnell died of a broken heart. And Ireland drowned in blood."

He paused in turning to go, but did not look back.

"I'll wait till tomorrow, anyway," he said.

Nicholas Mason, the American Representative to the U.N., his face noble and haggard, thanked the President again for having asked him to continue in office. Then, in a low voice, he told his latest tale of defeats, struggles, major setbacks, and minor victories.

Smith interrupted him, "What in your opinion, Mr. Ambassador—in your personal and confidential opinion—would be the effect of a scandal, an open and notorious and unsavory scandal, concerning the personal life of the President?"

Mason brought his mind to bear on this abrupt question with visible difficulty. Slowly he raised his eyes and looked at Smith. Then a tremor ran over his face. "I can hardly suppose that this question is hypothetical, Mr. President?" The President shook his head. In a voice still lower, Mason asked, "Could this scandal of which you speak be averted? Is it possible? Then—"

"Averted only at great cost to the welfare of the Nation, and possibly, probably, involving dangers to its prestige, its proper functioning, and perhaps even its peace."

Mason slowly raised his hand

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and laid the palm against his face. "I may at least hope that the danger could not be that great. Even so, it would then be a matter of balancing dangers . . . costs. I need hardly tell you—I need hardly tell you—at this juncture, anything which would divide the country might well destroy the country. And then—you spoke of our prestige—it's none too high as it is. I . . ." His voice died into a whisper.

Smith muttered, "I could resign, I suppose."

Mason snapped straight. "No President of the United States has *ever* resigned! *Mr. President!* Had you forgotten who would succeed you? If the present Vice-President were put in charge of a chickenyard, my money would be on the hawks and the weasels!"

Smith's face twisted.

"You have been a soldier, Mr. President," Mason continued. "I have not. But I know, and you surely know, that there is more than one way to win a battle. It is up to you to decide which way it has to be now. And need I say . . . if I can in any way . . .?"

The President gravely shook his head.

Left alone, he got up and went to the windows. It was miserable weather. Only three days ago he had been inaugurated, on a crisp and sparkling afternoon. Despite all he knew of the world scene the day had seemed flecked with gold. He had caught sight of Sarra, face shining with triumph, dressed in a gray robe which had appeared to his eyes then as brighter than scarlet or crimson. Now the dying sun broke through the clouds briefly and turned the wet walks and puddles red: yet his mood was gray, grayer than it had ever been before in his life. Sarra's voice rang in his ears, her face was before his eyes, and for the first time he failed to draw comfort from either.

Could she deal with Jim at this late stage? Persuade him to do nothing? Could he be trusted to remain persuaded?

Or should he, the President, give the man the office he coveted, oblige him to live up to his own first picture of it, a sinecure in which the actual work was done by others? And depend on the tight rein of the President from there on?

But would Jim remain content? Might he not have more "ideas?" His own, or others, it might not even matter—ideas, policies, plans, purposes, ambitions? Where would it stop? James Thackeray Macdonald, red-faced little politician, the Secret President of the United States!

But where, where had he got the *nerve?* Why—and how—after all these years, had he brought himself to defy his wife? Except in those easy cajoleries which

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came so naturally to him, and which had made politics his natural field; except in these shallows he had scarcely ever seemed to have a mind of his own or an ambition which was not Sarra's. Why, after all these years, had the worm turned?

For a long time, in the lowering dusk, the President of the United States stayed at the window, deep in thought.

Then he drew the curtains and went to the teleview.

He had thought that the three men might ask many questions—or, rather, bring forth cautions and disagreements disguised as questions; but they asked only two.

Anderson, this time, was silent. It was Lovel who spoke first.

"Mr. President," he began, "have you concluded that in order to maintain the integrity of our national confederation it is imperative for you to invoke the unknown law?"

"I have," said Roger David Smith.

Lovel's face was impassive, but the skin seemed suddenly tighter on the almost fleshless bones.

"What is his name?" he asked.

Softly, almost gently, the President corrected him.

"*Her* name," he said.

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a NEW crime-detective story by

JOHN PIERCE

Expensive sports car, luxury apartment off campus, LSD — and a 23-year-old no-better-than-she-should-be student murdered . . . To Associate Professor Sykes of the English Department of Hargis College it meant ruin: "Three academic degrees, twelve years of teaching—and with one blow to the head of one young lady it was all gone."

Meet Captain Samuel Wardlaw in a contemporary murder investigation that will remind you in some ways of the detective stories written by Mark Van Doren . . .

THE PIG STICKER

by JOHN PIERCE

HE WOULD HAVE CONFESSED at the outset, but then the Selkirks showed up in their Cadillac full of Stella's fancy airline luggage and invited them over to clean the mud off their hands.

Or so Associate Professor Sykes of the English Department later told himself. Or rationalized. There were other—call them ideological—reasons for his not confessing. For too long now, ever since the Administration Building burn-in and ruthless ouster, he had been a leader in the harangue against the police, against police brutality. He had made the local newspapers with his diatribes. Lovingly they called him "The Pig Sticker"—and to be ushered now into a paddy wagon with the crowd and the reporters watching? No, alas. Ruin was disastrous enough without that humiliation. And he was ruined, his career blasted, and he could no more fathom this than the enormity of the emptiness in the murdered girl's eyes.

She lay sodden in the ravine across Kensington Boulevard from the campus, quite within view of the faculty residence hall where Lester Sykes lived. The fog had

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only lifted toward mid-afternoon, and then some children had found her and an unidentified source had implicated the student, Bruce Broadnax, whose faculty advisor Sykes was. Picked up by the police, the boy was incoherent, all full of LSD.

Now, with Detective Captain Samuel Wardlaw, Sykes stood in the rain beside Eunice Slocum's body as the black plastic sheet was pulled away. She was still startlingly pretty, and unmarked except for the scratches on her legs, which obviously had been the result of her having been dragged downhill through the thorns. A single blow to the back of the head in the very early morning had done it, ventured the Medical Examiner, and there were indications of heavy drinking. One smelled the alcohol.

"Thank you," said Wardlaw to the M.E., and began to climb back up the mud embankment, Sykes following, framing his confession to these police he detested, and muddying his hands while grasping roots to keep from slipping down.

Then up alongside the ambulance and the police cars drove the Selkirks. Dr. Arthur Selkirk was head of the English Department, Sykes's superior; he was rounding out his 35th year at Hargis College. Was that fatigue in his eyes from a long day's driving, or chagrin at having been elsewhere when a murdered body was found? He was the most ghoulishly rabid of crime buffs and friendly with Captain Wardlaw; often he was seen following the detective about as Sykes was on this rainy afternoon—though for far less frightening reasons, of course.

"But you *must* come over and wash up and let me give you some hot coffee," exclaimed Stella, once over her shock at learning who the dead girl was. "We're only half a block away, you know, just beyond that hedgery."

Sykes prayed Wardlaw would refuse the invitation, but refusal was not likely. They did need a wash-up, and since Dr. Selkirk was senior man on the Hargis faculty, there were bound to be questions about drug usage among the students.

Wardlaw accepted. But they were too muddy for the automobile, and the rear seat was piled high with Stella's luggage. So they followed the car on foot, leaving the crowd behind. It was still raining; it had rained since midnight, a statistic that Sykes, to his sorrow, could have documented first-hand by the wet clothing he had left in his tub. That of course would be part of the confession he'd have to make sooner or later.

Glumly he followed Captain Wardlaw, a stocky, graying,

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taciturn figure who had somewhere learned of Sykes's relationship to Broadnax and called him out of the crowd. Sykes, The Pig Sticker. Wardlaw knew, and here they were roped together. What could one gracefully say?

Stella had money and the Selkirks lived in unprofessorial splendor. The comfortable house was walled off by athel trees and high hedges, and they bought a new Cadillac bi-yearly, and this spring she had flown off to Yugoslavia and then to Turkey, Greece, and Israel. Sykes had not expected her back for another week or so. He was rather fond of Stella, but his differences with Dr. Selkirk were exacerbating and acute. They were transferring the luggage from auto to porch when Wardlaw led the way up the looping driveway. Stella groped for her keys.

"Hideous situation," mourned Selkirk, setting down a suitcase in the vestibule. "And to happen at this very time."

"Why 'this very time?' " asked Wardlaw.

"My God, Sam, the banquet tonight—it's the kickoff of our annual fund drive. It's the closest thing to a crash, 'must' program we have."

"And this should dampen the alumni ardor?"

"Dampen hell. Bury it. Let it hit tomorrow's paper that a student killed a girl while on LSD?"

The statement asked for little embellishment. Indeed, reflected Sykes, it offered reverberations beyond Selkirk's most awful fears. The dead girl, Eunice Slocum, had done free-lance typing for half a score of professors and departments at the college; beyond that it was no secret that her after-hours flame burned steady and blue. She drank, she was unpredictable, she could turn wildcat. But she was so easy, and so— How many professors at this moment were scurrying about their living quarters with vacuum cleaners searching out random bobby pins on the floor, expunging all traces of the girl? How many would be called up for questioning?—and their antipathy to the police so well-known.

Stella came in with another suitcase and stepped to a hall closet. "Here's a clean towel, Lester, and one for you, Captain. *Do* use the bathroom there at the end of the hall."

Wardlaw deferred to Sykes, who went miserably down the hall. He wondered that Selkirk had survived Stella's absence: books, dirty clothing, and dishevelment were everywhere, even small puddles of water on the hardwood. The bedroom was chaos, and in the bathroom there were dirty porcelain and bits of soap and toilet tissue and an unwashed razor on the tub's edge.

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Prerogatives of intellectualism: Einstein was said to go sockless and Selkirk was the dreamer supreme.

Sykes cleansed the mud from his hands and toweled rain from his hair. Ruined, he repeated to himself. And what else but teaching was he fit to do? Would they let him finish out the semester or even give him a cautious reference to some rural high school? More conceivably he foresaw time in jail. He had gone too far with his police baiting. They'd not let this chance go by to even the score.

Returning, he gave way to Wardlaw. In the living room stacked with books and manuscripts, Selkirk lay back on a chaise longue, his head in his hands, while Stella, visible through the room divider, started the coffee going.

"So Broadnax finally caught up with himself," Selkirk said wryly.

"Funny you should put it that way," Stella said. "I was just going to say the same about Eunice Slocum."

"She did some drinking, of course. I never heard of her experimenting with drugs."

"You know what I'm talking about," Stella admonished. "It's unkind, and her lying out there, dead forever; but let's face it—going home nights with *whoever* picked her up at a bar—"

"Oh, come now," said Selkirk. "How much of that can you document? Whereas the data on Broadnax is all on record. How many of his courses was he failing, Lester? About five out of six?"

For a moment Sykes made no answer. He had sat down on a wet part of the sofa, feeling soap in the pillow under his hand. Moving, willing that site to Wardlaw, he said tonelessly, "Those he had no interest in."

"Then he oughtn't to have been in college," said Selkirk, a notorious conservative. "I think of the hundreds of others who'd have jumped at his chance to be here."

Sykes did not argue. It was useless. On these matters he and Selkirk were oil and water. Selkirk was twenty years behind the times. Sykes watched him hook up an electric shaver while Stella spoke to Wardlaw, who had reappeared.

"What a *madd*ening thing, all of it! We had pulled in at a filling station in Plattsville and this *sta*tion attendant said he'd just heard it on the radio. They'd found a girl dead right off the campus, but he hadn't caught her name. And of course we were *fran*tic to know, what with this banquet tonight. Arthur even tried calling from the phone booth but the lines were jammed, and all the way home we kept dialing that

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wretched radio for some elaboration. *Noth*ing. And so it was Eunice all the while, lying there in the rain."

"Since how long, Sam?" asked Selkirk, stopping the shaver.

"Death estimated between midnight and around three a.m.," Wardlaw said.

"And then dumped d o w n there," sighed Stella. "And who found her?"

"Some children, about an hour and a half ago."

"Why not before then, I wonder," Selkirk mused. "It looked as though she'd have been visible from the boulevard."

"Fog didn't lift until midafternoon," Wardlaw said. From his sports jacket he produced a cigar.

"Absent-minded professor," chided Stella, nodding to indicate her husband. "Four hundred miles round trip he drives to rescue me in the middle of the night because the local airport's fogged in, and *al*ready he's forgotten why."

"Professor, not weatherman," reproved Selkirk. "I could hardly have expected it to last all day." To the Captain he now apologized for what he termed "this shave-in." "I have this formal b a n q u e t tonight and very little time and a lot to do."

"And a distinguished guest to address you, I understand," Wardlaw said.

"Dis*ting*uished!" exclaimed Stella, and blew on her fingernails with mimic hauteur. "God bless us all and little Hargis College. The leading English classicist, no less—Sir Hampton V e n a b l e - Beade."

"F.R.S., F.B.A., D.C.L.," murmured Selkirk, arching his neck for the shaver, "and we'll read about him in the papers tomorrow morning—a little squib beneath the pictures of a m u r d e r e d drunkardess and a w o r t h l e s s lout."

Sykes winced at the vision. All because of him.

"Is Sir Hampton what brought you home early?" Wardlaw was asking Stella.

"Not really, but it helped. I'd planned going on to Egypt for two weeks but once t h o s e *block*heads saw 'Israel' on my passport they said no. Do I look like a spy?"

"And then couldn't even get home," Wardlaw said.

"No, couldn't even get home. Circled around about two hours and landed in Medina." Medina was two hundred miles north.

And woke up her husband at midnight to come get her, thought Sykes. How typical. But then Stella had grown up with money; one could hardly visualize her riding in a crowded bus.

Selkirk put his shaver aside. "Well, let's have the bad news, Sam. How seriously is young Broadnax implicated? What are

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the chances that you're wrong?"

"It's too early yet to be absolutely sure."

"But you've apprehended him, taken him in."

"His red sports car was seen at about two o'clock this morning on the road shoulder just above where the girl's body was found."

"By whom at that hour, in that fog?"

"Anonymous call once the news started to spread."

"And you mean to say you arrest people on the strength of such nonsense?"

"Not usually. But her purse was found in his car."

"Oh," murmured Selkirk. "And Broadnax?"

"Incoherent. Hardly knows his name from the day of the week."

"Then what's he in jail for, why not the hospital?" blurted Sykes before he could stop himself, quite forgetting his own dilemma.

"I've been asked that by about one-third of the faculty already," Wardlaw answered. "How I wish you people would install some kind of course in Consistency in your curriculum. Not long ago you yourself were making speeches on this subject, Sykes—how harmless LSD is, how beneficial to the psyche. Now, suddenly, it's a medical affair. Regrettably, my concern is not hurt feelings but the murder of a twenty-three-year-old girl."

Stella peered at her coffee cup. "Well, we all knew he was the school rakehell—he and his friend Alex Farmer; but I scarcely suspected him of narcotics. Did you, Lester?"

"He didn't seem—" Sykes dissembled, skirting the truth.

"Broadnax honored us with his presence for one reason," Selkirk said. "To avoid, as he put it, 'wasting two years' of his life in the army. Instead he chose to waste four years of it here, and our time and patience with it—though Lester here tends to disagree."

"I found him most gifted," Sykes said, staring at his muddy shoes. "A most talented writer, like a giant among children in my Creative Writing Workshop. To me it's quite understandable, his having little interest in, say, Economics or Mathematics."

"My concern is his interest in LSD," Wardlaw said. "Was it something he's done often, do you know?"

"No," said Sykes. "Or not until—"

"Until?"

"Until last night. I learned he was behaving strangely and went out looking for him."

"When was this?"

"Late in the evening. I asked around. I went to his apartment twice. He wasn't there."

"And how did you learn of this trip of his?"

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Sykes said nothing.

"Someone you'd rather not drag into it, is that it?"

Sykes nodded and dangled miserably in the silence. He had not yet told the lie in so many words, but he'd circled and gone over and burrowed under it. He supposed he would need a lawyer, though God knows what he'd pay a lawyer with. Maybe the ACLU. He was ruined, that was irrevocable, and because of him Broadnax stood as good as indicted for murder.

"And you, Dr. Selkirk, did you have such knowledge?"

"What's the relevance, Sam?" Selkirk countered. "You've got him, you've ascertained he was on LSD, and you have evidence that he killed the girl. Are we as teachers to be held to account?"

"You're jumping to conclusions, Doctor," Wardlaw said. "What I am interested in is determining his behavior patterns if taking acid was his customary thing. I'd like nothing better than to help the boy and get you all off the hook."

"You might as well tell him, Arthur," said Stella.

Selkirk sighed. "Why not just say 'crucify the boy,' and the whole bloody fund drive with it?"

"*Ar*thur," she said firmly, " 'the boy' is twenty-two years old and this college is in trouble, and for months now you've been grousing against present-day permissiveness. Why not tell the Captain just what you told me in the motel?"

"All right," he shot back, and abandoned his coffee to pour a drink from a decanter on the lowboy beside him. "It still doesn't mean anything."

"This isn't a courtroom, Doctor," Wardlaw said. "Why not let me decide?"

"Well enough then, on the assumption that you'll understand my position and my reluctance. God knows it's detestable, but we have about fifteen hundred well-behaved, serious youngsters here who are really trying, and to expect us to wet-nurse every kid who's had a sniff or two of marijuana or speed or worse—no, it's not what I came into teaching for."

"You're saying you've seen Broadnax in a drugged condition?"

"What a prospector you are, Sam." He looked dolefully at Sykes. "I'm sorry, Lester, I have to."

Sykes said nothing.

"Dr. Sykes has been extremely generous, not wanting to implicate me," Selkirk said. "He came by here around ten thirty last night, justifiably worried, saying that Broadnax seemed to have got loose under the influence of the stuff. Sykes here is the boy's faculty advisor, and we're known

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here for the closeness of the student-teacher relationship. He wanted my advice on what to do."

"And?"

Selkirk gestured feebly. "I regret now that I dismissed him rather peremptorily. I said, let him damn well sleep it off and have his hangover or otherwise take his medicine. I admit I may be short on clairvoyance, but one gets so exhaustively fed up with these rich young kids who arrive in their sports cars and move into their off-campus luxury apartments and go yelping to the moon about their 'rights.' " He downed his drink and drummed his fingers on the coffee table.

"And?" Wardlaw prompted again.

Selkirk shrugged. "That was all. Sykes left and I finished working on my remarks for the banquet tonight and then went to bed. Around midnight Stella called me from Medina, where her plane was forced to land. She said not to worry, she'd taxi to a nearby motel and take a bus down this morning. I was half asleep and not thinking too perspicaciously. I agreed and hung up."

Stella winked. "But on afterthought he didn't trust me alone in a *gla*morous motel, with all those traveling salesmen around."

"It's no time for archness," said Selkirk wearily. "Stella, for all her virtues, tends to believe every television commercial she sees—the happy, well-tailored executives and their wives wearing Bergdorf suits and Gucci shoes, laughing their way on and off those friendly cross-country buses. Fortunately for her illusions she's never had to ride on one. I thought about that, her jamming and elbowing her way through with six or eight pieces of luggage, and called her back just before she left the airport. She gave me the name of the motel and I told her that I'd drive up and catch some sleep there and bring her back today."

He paused. He furrowed his brow and touched his beakish nose. "You'll forgive me all this petty detail but it does have its eventual relevance—I'm working toward some fixation of time. To have waited for morning to drive four hundred miles there and back was a little risky with the fog. Motor trouble on a tight schedule could have made me late for the banquet, which I wanted her to attend with me and for which I am, after all, the M.C." He left off again.

"So you drove off after midnight and you saw Broadnax."

"Just in time to avoid being killed. I was coming out of the drive here—let's estimate it at twelve forty-five—when a red sports car came skidding across the boulevard in the rain. I slammed my brakes on and he went twirling past where I'd have been

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had I not seen him in time. It was definitely Broadnax; he was right in my headlights. And he had Eunice beside him. They'd slammed against the curb and were stopped."

"His condition?"

"Glassy-eyed, but I was still shaking with fright. By the time I thought to get the door open and walk over there he'd started up again and roared away."

"And Eunice?"

"Laughing like all get-out, next to him. Full of liquor, apparently. She had that problem, you know. It's why I quit letting her do any more work for me. When was it I chased her off, Stella?"

"About two months ago."

"She drank in the daytime, you're saying?"

"Oh, no, just say she was letting her night life interfere with her typist's métier. And that's all I can tell you, Sam." He stood. "I do have to get into my dinner dress now, and you too, Stella. I'm to pick up Sir Hampton at his hotel. Yes, I suppose I should have gone chasing Broadnax or at least notified the police. But I didn't. We try to keep our little campus problems out of the police courts and the press, you know."

"You've helped me. Thank you, Stella. I'll take Sykes to the station with me and together maybe we can get something out of the boy."

Dejectedly Sykes followed the Captain down the driveway walled by athel trees. It was raining and dark, and getting darker. As of the moment Broadnax opened his mouth, he, Sykes, could start packing. He thought of Selkirk, of his disdain for bus travel. What wouldn't Sykes give to be on a bus this very moment, riding far away? Three academic degrees, twelve years of teaching—and with one blow to the head of one young lady it was all gone.

The streetlight above Wardlaw's car was not working. The ambulance, the police, the crowd were gone. Even so, looking downhill, Sykes saw Eunice as of the time they had removed the black plastic—the pretty face, the shapely figure, the scratches on her attractive legs.

"You did say that was your residence hall across the street, didn't you?" Wardlaw asked.

He couldn't have forgotten. He was closing in. "Yes, it is," Sykes answered, getting into Wardlaw's sedan.

"But not much chance of your seeing, much less identifying, a car parked here at two in the morning—at least, not in that fog."

"And not with the streetlight out," Sykes added. "I'm surprised anyone could."

Should he do it now? Should he come out with it or go on hoping for some break in the chain of evidence shifting suspi-

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cion away from Broadnax? That was too much to hope for. Dared he wait until the last minute—until just before the interrogation of Broadnax? Failure to say anything until then would offer but one connotation—that he'd withheld evidence and thereby contrived to railroad the boy.

Sykes stared out the window as Wardlaw made a U-turn, pursued the boulevard, and turned right. "Never volunteer information," was an old saw of his father's. Plausible enough from an armchair, Sykes thought, but here murder and Broadnax's life were involved.

On a narrow street off the campus Wardlaw pulled the sedan over and cut the engine. Sykes knew the locale perfectly, and the Chinese-red sports car parked ahead. Broadnax's. An officer in raincoat came from beneath a carport to salute as they got out. He said, "Sergeant Doan took the purse to headquarters, Captain."

"Where in the car was it found?"

"Down on the rear floor, just behind—almost under—the right-front seat."

"And nothing else has been touched?"

"Not a door handle. They're supposed to be sending a wrecker to haul it in."

Wardlaw bent into one of the open front windows. Uselessly Sykes looked in from the other side. The leather seats were wet from the rain, and on the back seat a news-magazine was thrown open on top of a cluster of thin-wire coat hangers. Wardlaw grunted, circled to the street side, then kneeled to peer closely beneath the automobile, sweeping the asphalt intently with his flashlight.

"Dry as a bone," he said.

"What is?"

"Pavement under there. Odd place for a purse, the rear floor. Why, do you suppose?"

"I don't know," Sykes said.

"Try this, then. Why—purse being in the rear—why make love on a back seat piled with coat hangers when there's an apartment to take her to?"

"I'm pretty sure he didn't take her there," Sykes answered. "I went there looking—twice, as I told you. Once just after ten o'clock, and again around midnight. His apartment door was unlocked and I looked in, but he wasn't there."

"No, and wasn't when we found him this afternoon. He was three apartments down—in the apartment of a classmate who seems to be away. Fellow named Alex Farmer, whose name keeps cropping up. Know anything about him?"

"Only to recognize. He's in engineering, I believe. I've not had him in a class."

"And how about Broadnax's

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car when you came last night? Was it here?"

"Yes, I noticed specifically. I had hoped to find the keys inside so I could take them and at least keep him off the road in his condition."

"And no luck?"

"No," Sykes said, and followed the Captain back to the sedan. They were nearing the business district when Wardlaw spoke again.

"Where else did this search of yours take you, Dr. Sykes?"

"To the beer joints around the campus—places I knew he went to. I tried to find friends of his who might have seen him."

"And at what time did you give up looking?"

"Not until one o'clock or so."

"Then you were out when it started to rain."

"Without a raincoat."

"And what time was that? Can you pinpoint just when it began to rain?"

"To the minute, very nearly. It hit all of a sudden and I ducked into the Capriccio Bar to wait for it to slacken. Their clock said twelve ten."

"Pretty heavy rain then? I was asleep."

"More steady than heavy. But never enough to dissipate the fog."

"And it hasn't stopped since," said Wardlaw.

"No." What was he getting at? Getting closer, that was what. Sykes listened to the windshield wipers and thought of the girl killed and Broadnax behind bars, and realized in an avalanche the complete futility of it. He said, "Captain, I guess I've got something to tell you."

"I rather had the feeling you did."

"Then it showed?"

"I've been doing this for twenty-five years, Dr. Sykes."

"During which you've mastered the finer points of cat-and-mouse, I should think. Knowing all along. Saying nothing. Crouching over me like some damned panther."

Wardlaw smiled. "I won't know till you tell me. Come on, Sykes, come on now. Have I brutalized you? My God, so we threw some students out of the Administration Building for burning up the files. They claim adulthood but they reject adult punishment, and ever since that day you've been on your little stump out there shrilling 'police brutality.' Why don't you try me out? Tell me what you have to say. I might surprise you."

"It will finish me at Hargis, I'm afraid."

"That's not up to us, is it?"

"I don't know. You see, I gave Broadnax the LSD."

"Not very smart, was it, or am I being Victorian?"

"No, but he'd have got it somewhere else on his own and

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I decided it had better be under my supervision. I thought at first he was joking, but then he began to insist. I've said he's an exceptionally good writer for someone his age, but he had this feeling he was only skating on the surface of things and wanted a try at speaking from an inner level, just one try. I'd administer a safe moderate dose in my apartment in total secrecy and supply him with quotes and sentences on which he would, on paper, expand."

"This was what time last night?"

"Nine or so. I got the stuff from someone who knew its exact potency—"

"But knew nothing about Broadnax's mental makeup."

"It was to be a controlled scientific experiment, nothing more."

"And?"

"Well, you see, in California two years ago I myself took it experimentally under supervision and learned that, handled carefully, it does offer striking insights into—"

"Doctor, don't try to sell me on it. Just tell me what happened."

"Well, you've got him on a murder charge is what happened," shot back Sykes, "but I sure as hell never dreamed I was setting loose some damn Frankenstein's monster. He took the stuff and I read him a sentence from Baudelaire and he began to write. While he wrote my telephone in the bedroom rang. It was one of my students with an involved question. When I got back, the door was open and Broadnax was gone."

"Had he driven to your place in his car?"

"Oh, no. That was a precondition—that he leave the car at home. Now I realize I should have asked him in advance for his keys."

"And so you went out looking. On foot, I assume."

"On foot. Everywhere I could think of."

"Including, toward ten thirty, Dr. Selkirk."

"To our mutual regret, I'm afraid. He's been awfully tied up with this banquet and the fund drive, and it was a poor time to bother him with something like this."

"But you didn't tell him your part in it."

"I might have, but I'd put him in a bad temper with the mere mention of Broadnax, and he was in his pajamas and did not ask me in."

"Does he usually?"

"Usually I don't go there. It was pretty late to be ringing his bell without an appointment."

"Probably so," mused Wardlaw, and pulled the car into the curb near the police station.

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He cut the motor and mouthed his cigar. "So you feel now that the girl's death is your responsibility."

"I'll take it if it's a way of saving Broadnax."

"Nobly said. Still you say he'd have taken the stuff without you."

"That would cut very little ice with the Board of Trustees."

"No, I guess it wouldn't. We'll just hope it's a lesson you won't forget soon."

"It's been that since he disappeared."

"I'm glad you told me voluntarily. I think we might salvage your career."

"In return for what?" Sykes demanded.

Wardlaw shook his head. "Boy, you've really been reading those speeches you make. In return for nothing. It does seem to me though, with all the stuff we get about our lack of intelligence, that you people with all your knowledge could have pulled off a murder that might at least have challenged our limited wits. It didn't, thanks in part to Stella."

"Stella?"

"The rain started after midnight. The pavement under the Broadnax car is absolutely dry, and there are pockets in the asphalt that would have retained water. And the windows were all left open, as you saw. No one drove that car anywhere—not after midnight."

"But her purse was found in the car."

"Planted. Where better in a hurry than down on the floor behind the seat where it couldn't be seen by a passerby and wouldn't be stolen."

"How was the car seen, then, at two a.m. near where her body was?"

"As I said, we received this anonymous phone call. But not until *after* the body was found and the news got out over the radio. The things people think they can get away with by direct long-distance dialing. The phone call came from a filling station in Plattsville where the Selkirks first heard the news."

"But he—Dr. Selkirk, I mean—he *saw* the two of them in the car at twelve forty-five."

"How, if the car hadn't been moved?"

"You mean he's covering for someone?"

"I'd hate to have him cover for me. How is it you people don't realize that when we've got patrol cars cruising that campus and its environs every single night of the year—for your protection, not your enchainment, contrary to your fiery diatribes—how can't you give us credit for knowing just a little bit about what's going on? We've been called in on half a dozen drinking parties where Eunice was the chief loudmouth and ashtray thrower. We know

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what bachelor quarters she comes straggling out of at five in the morning. Ever since Stella left it's been Selkirk's place, all cutely hidden away by that hedgery, but not quite hidden enough."

"I didn't know," said Sykes, and thought now to protect the faculty. "But tell me, as a matter of clinical information, do you make a practice of discussing these findings with outsiders?"

"Only in your case, because our people checking alleys in this rain tonight deserve a lot better than you've been giving them. Anyway, you're not in much of a position to break confidences."

Blackmail, eh? "You've only my word that I gave him LSD, and I'm not represented by counsel."

"Your word and Broadnax's. He told us. 'Where'd you get it' was the first question we asked him."

"Tricked again," Sykes said sarcastically.

"Life is cruel. Whitewashed is the word I thought of. Don't blame Broadnax. You put him there, but it has nothing to do with Eunice. You called on Selkirk and got a brushoff; you definitely weren't invited in. Next Stella by telephone announces her unexpected return. Selkirk is saved by a fogbound airport, but he doesn't know for how long. What does that do for your domestic imagery?"

"Mental pandemonium, if Eunice was there."

"Carry it further. Picture her naked, drunk, belligerent, and refusing to leave, or even demanding from this rich household such emoluments as he's not about to give her, or just throwing the kind of tantrum that drives him to the end of his rope. He might even lose his temper and reach for something. Then suddenly he's back phoning the Medina airport, followed by a two-hundred-mile midnight drive through fog and rain to get her, even though she, Stella, has available to her a safe modern motel. No, if it had been me, I think I'd have waited until daylight, by which time the local airport might have cleared. Leaving at dawn he'd still have had twelve hours to get there and back to his banquet, and she could have spelled him at the wheel; she knows how to drive a car."

"It's a lively bit of theorizing, but not much else."

"Then you didn't notice that look of horror on his face when Stella invited us over there. Talk about your Pandora's box. He might not even have been called on to tell us that long involved lie about seeing Broadnax."

"Why did he?"

"Scared. Terrified. Stella had given me the run of that bathroom where Eunice was happily and probably drunkenly tubbing

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herself when at midnight the telephone rang. She heard the name Stella and couldn't resist. Didn't even dry herself to go tippy-toeing in to listen behind him. There are still puddles of water on the hardwood—you must have seen them; and a cushion on that sofa where I sat was still soapy-wet. Here the scene occurred; here he hit her. We'll have a look for what he used. What to do now? Broadnax, naturally, who's out of his skull, is the perfect fall guy. Strip the incriminating sheets off the bed, dump her body with the assistance of that zero fog, plant her purse to implicate Broadnax, and get to hell two hundred miles away."

"Fantastic," protested Sykes. "But you've not a speck of evidence."

"I have this," Wardlaw said, and from a pocket he removed a bulk of toilet tissue. Unwrapped it to reveal the still dirty safety razor Sykes had seen on the edge of the bathtub. "Cuts on her legs weren't from thorns, as you may have thought, but from a pretty slapdash leg-shaving job she did with borrowed equipment. Razor's still clogged with dry soap, and we'll run the blood and hairs through the lab for comparison with her own. She left the tub a bit hurriedly, as I said. Never to return."

"*I* have an electric shaver too; it doesn't mean I don't *sometimes* use a safety razor."

"Yes, but first and foremost you're a scholar, Dr. Sykes. A cop hater, The Pig Sticker—but still a scholar. Go back through your long years of bachelor associations and tell me how many men living alone that you've known keep their safety razors on the rim of the bathtub."

Sykes sagged. Convinced, finally chastened, he said, "It's good of you to let him get through the banquet."

"We try to co-exist," Wardlaw said. "And our own food, it's pretty bad."

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a *NEW* con-men story by

ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

Lang and Lovell again—Lovell, the "inside man," and Lang, the "outside man"— a coalition of con men, a partnership of pirates, a small syndicate of swindlers who specialize in art frauds . . .

ONLY BET ON A SURE THING

by ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

GRIERSON LEANED BACK IN HIS chair and placed his fingertips carefully together. "Let me see if I understand this, Mr. Lang," he said. He was a short fat man with a round baby-smooth face out of which jutted an incongruous sharp-pointed chin. His deep booming voice clashed sharply with this innocuous appearance. So did his quick mind. In fact, his mind was so quick that I was beginning to suspect that I'd made a mistake in approaching him. But nothing ventured nothing gained, and I had a deep faith in his basic dishonesty.

"Let me see if I understand this," he repeated. "You propose to substitute this copy of Mazzaratti's Adoration of Narcissus for the original in the Snowden Galleries and then turn the original over to me for $50,000."

"That's right," I said. We were in Grierson's study, a pleasantly bright room paneled with three kinds of blond wood and furnished to match. The copy in question lay between us on Grierson's highly polished desk. I leaned forward and moved the painting closer to him.

"As you can see," I said, "the copy is an unusually fine one, made by an artist friend of mine using Mazzaratti's exact technique and only the materials available at the time the original was painted. For all practical purposes it's an exact duplicate of the original." I smiled to show my sincerity. "In fact," I went on, "short of a spectroscopic or elec-

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troluminescent examination there's no way to tell the two apart."

Grierson pursed his lips and nodded slowly. It was a thoughtful gesture. And I didn't like that at all. I preferred my—ah—clients to be openly consumed by greed, by the true collector's passion for a new thing—not calmly thinking things over and analyzing my proposition from every angle. Grierson was a collector all right. Proof of that hung on the walls surrounding us, but most of his collection had been an inheritance from his grandfather. And maybe that's what makes the difference.

"Oh," he said, "I'll grant you that it is an excellent copy. I'll even grant you that it would take a most thorough examination to distinguish between it and the original. What concerns me, though, is how you plan to switch the paintings."

I smiled and shook my head. "Professional secret, Mr. Grierson," I said.

Grierson shook his own head in return and more emphatically than I had. "I'm afraid that answer won't do," he said. "If I'm going to risk my money and my reputation I have to be sure the plan has a very good chance of succeeding. Especially since museums are becoming more and more security-minded."

Since he put it that way I had no choice but to explain. And that called for some quick thinking on my part. Since, of course, I had no intention of switching any paintings. Instead, I intended to return in six weeks and sell him the copy that lay before him now. It was a simple scheme but one that had worked very well—or had until now.

Figuring that the best defense was a good offense I said, "Are you familiar with the security system at the Snowden, Mr. Grierson?"

Grierson waved a hand negligently. "Not in every detail," he said in an offhand voice.

Which meant of course that he had no idea of what security precautions the Snowden had taken. I kept the relief out of my voice and face and went on smoothly, "Well, like most places with valuable things to guard, the museum has set up its security system to keep people from breaking in and taking things out. Accordingly, it's not really able to cope with someone who's already inside." I spread my hands. "And that, quite simply put, is the essence of my plan. I go into the museum through the front door just like any other visitor. But then just before closing time I'll duck into a small storage closet on the third floor near the Managing Director's office. When it's dark enough, I'll sneak out, switch the paintings and sneak back again. The next morning, as soon as there's

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enough of a crowd to make me inconspicuous, I'll simply walk out the front door."

"And," Grierson said sarcastically, "of course no one will notice the painting tucked under your arm."

I beamed at him. "Of course they won't," I said, "because it'll be hidden in a hollowed-out artist's pad. And there are always enough would-be artists floating about the museum sketching so that one more won't arouse any comment."

Grierson nodded thoughtfully. "Just audacious enough so that it might work." He sighed. "It's almost a pity that I have to turn you down."

"Turn me down!" I said, and the surprise in my voice was not at all pretended. "In heaven's name, why?"

"Because," Grierson said flatly, "I only bet on a sure thing. And in this case I could never be sure I had the original and not—" he nodded toward the painting on his desk "— this or another excellent copy just like it." He shook his head. "I'm afraid the odds just don't appeal to me."

I stood up. "Well," I said huffily, reaching for the painting, "if you don't trust me—"

Grierson didn't move. "Oh, come now, Mr. Lang," he said, "just because we don't trust one another is no reason we can't do business together. Except that we'll do it on my terms, not yours."

I sat down. "What did you have in mind?" I said. "And call me Harry."

Grierson smiled, a wintry twist of the lips that left the rest of his face unmoved. "All right, Harry," he said. He leaned forward, elbows on the desk, and pointed the eraser end of a pencil at me. "This artist friend of yours, is he still available?" His voice had suddenly become crisp and businesslike.

"Lovell?" I said. "Sure. We're partners. He does the painting and I do the selling. Why?"

Grierson swiveled in his chair to face the wall behind him. There were several paintings hung there, but your eyes were inevitably drawn to one. It was a seascape with dark, almost black rocks in the foreground and in the distance the sun setting through a cloud formation. The water between the rocks flowed liquid gold in the reflected sunlight. It was a wonderfully warm and beautiful painting and I sensed that the entire room had been designed to complement it.

Grierson didn't speak for a few moments, then he said, "Can he duplicate that?"

"Very likely," I said. "But why should he?"

Grierson swiveled back. "Because," he said, "I'll pay $10,000 for the copy. That should

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be reason enough, shouldn't it?"

I shook my head. "Now it's my turn to say the answer isn't good enough," I said. "It's not that we wouldn't like the money. But I would have to be sure that you're not planning to lure my partner and me into a police trap."

Grierson regarded me closely for a long minute. "Fair enough," he said at last. He turned back toward the painting. "Do you recognize it?" he said.

"Not offhand," I said.

"It's Glover's Sunset with Clouds and Rocks," Grierson said. "My grandfather bought it in 1939 for $250." He studied the picture thoughtfully for a moment, then went on, "At today's prices it's worth a quarter of a million."

"Now that," I said, "is what I'd call a smart investment."

"Yes," Grierson said absent-mindedly. "The ironic thing is that grandfather didn't intend it as an investment. He just wanted to help out a struggling artist. It was the kind of thing he was always doing, Grierson added distastefully. "This one just happened to pay off."

I thought idly that Lovell, who before teaming up with me had spent a number of years as a struggling artist himself, was going to really love this guy.

"Of all the paintings I inherited from grandfather," Grierson went on, "this is the prize." He sighed and turned back to me once again. "Are you aware of the terms of my grandfather's will?"

I shook my head. "No," I said, wondering why he thought I might be.

"Briefly," Grierson said, "it provides that I must give the local art museum its choice of any one of the paintings in his collection. If I don't within a year, his executor is directed to sell all the paintings and give the money to charity."

Suddenly I began to understand. "And the museum wants the Sunset," I said.

"Precisely," Grierson said. "But I can't bear to part with it. If I don't, though, I stand to lose everything."

"Tough," I said. "On the other hand, you could go to court and try to break the will."

Grierson nodded. "I could," he said. "And my lawyers admit that it's not impossible that I might win. But they indicate that image-wise it wouldn't do me any good." He smiled wryly. "And in these days of nosey Internal Revenue agents and anti-trust suits, none of us can afford to neglect our public image."

His smile lightened. "But now I have the ideal solution to my dilemma. Your artist friend duplicates the Sunset. I give the copy to the museum and everybody's happy. So how about it? Do we do business?"

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I nodded slowly. "We do," I said. "Only the price is $20,000—half in advance."

I'd told Lovell to wait for me outside a small restaurant several blocks from Grierson's home. And there he was, fidgeting on a bench which according to the sign on its back was furnished through the courtesy of the McBee Funeral Home. He bounced up as soon as he saw me coming.

"Oh, lord, Harry," he said, "am I glad to see you." He peered nervously around my shoulder. "Everything went all right, didn't it?"

"Almost," I said. I motioned with the fake Mazzaratti under my arm. "He was too smart to buy this, but we've got another deal cooking. Smaller profit but less risk. Come inside and have a cup of coffee while I tell you all about it."

"Coffee is a diuretic," Lovell said earnestly. "And the caffeine—" He shuddered with distaste but followed me into the restaurant anyway.

Besides being nervous as a cow, Lovell is a health food nut. I've never seen him eat a steak—too many steroids, he says—but he'll guzzle down the oddest concoctions of wheat germ, fermented mare's milk, or what-have-you without turning a hair. He has other qualities, though, which more than offset these peculiarities. I hadn't lied to Grierson when I said that Lovell could duplicate the Sunset. He's a master at copying other artists' styles. He can with equal ease duplicate an existing painting or create an "original" in the style of any painter you care to name. It's a rather limited talent, I admit—but a profitable one.

We sat down at a corner table where we couldn't be overheard. And after the waitress had taken our orders—coffee for me, yogurt for Lovell—I explained Grierson's proposition to him. He didn't say a word throughout, but his face gradually took on a sulky, stubborn cast. I gave him until the waitress had brought our orders and left again. Then I said, "All right. Let's have it. What's bothering you?"

He shook his head stubbornly and let his spoon drift through his yogurt. Finally, still without looking at me, he said, "Does your conscience ever bother you, Harry? Because of the things we do?"

"No," I said. I took a sip of coffee. "Does yours?"

Lovell frowned and chewed his lip as he thought that one over. "No," he said at last, "but sometimes I think maybe it should."

I put down my cup and said patiently, because we'd been over this ground before, "Well, the next time you get to feeling that

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way just remember these three things." I began to count off on my fingers. "One, the people we take can easily afford the loss. They wouldn't be art collectors if they weren't rich to begin with. Two, they always believe they're getting the clean end of the stick. And three, they're only getting what they deserve because we couldn't take them if they weren't dishonest at heart."

"I know," Lovell said. "But—" his voice broke indignantly "—this time we'd be helping a rich crook swindle a museum."

"Not," I said, "if we switch paintings and let Grierson keep the copy."

A smile brightened Lovell's face. "Harry," he said, "that's brilliant." Then as I knew it would, the reaction set in almost immediately. The smile faded and he looked at me anxiously. "Do you think we can get away with it?"

"Of course we can," I said. "You just eat your yogurt and leave everything to Old Harry."

I didn't know it then, but I'd just underestimated Grierson for the second time.

Since Lovell had to work from the original and since Grierson obviously wouldn't let us take it away with us, we had no choice but to work at his home. I helped Lovell pack his equipment—it filled a large-sized suitcase—and we taxied over to Grierson's house.

Grierson himself met us at the door. He frowned at the departing cab. "Was that wise?" he said. "That driver might remember having brought you here?"

"What if he does?" I said. "He doesn't know who we are or why we're here. There isn't a chance in the world that he'll connect us even remotely with your turning the Sunset over to the museum—assuming he bothers to keep up with donations to museums."

Grierson half turned and I saw for the first time that he wasn't alone. A stocky man with a cynical, horseplayer's face stood in the hallway behind him. "What do you think?" Grierson said to him.

The stocky man shrugged his heavy shoulders. "He's right," he said as if he were talking about someone 500 miles away in another state. "If they'd played it cute and tried to sneak in, they'd have only made themselves more conspicuous."

Grierson turned back to Lovell and me. "This is Murphy," he said by way of introduction. "Murphy does odd jobs for me."

Looking at Murphy, I could guess what sort of odd jobs. And I didn't like the implications of what I was thinking.

"You know," Grierson said as he escorted us back to the rooms

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he'd set aside for our use, "I really don't know which is giving me more pleasure—keeping the original Sunset or putting one over on those prigs at the museum." He laughed shortly. "Have you ever met Watson, the Managing Director?"

I assumed the question was directed to me alone since Grierson and I were leading, with Murphy and Lovell following. Murphy, of course, was letting Lovell carry his own suitcase.

"No," I said.

"The man's a fool," Grierson said contemptuously. "Always prattling about how art should be enjoyed by all and not hoarded like a miser's trove." He snorted. "As if everybody were capable—" He broke off. "Ah, here we are," he said. He flung open a door leading off the corridor. "I think you'll find this suitable to your needs."

It was a large airy room, bright with the afternoon sun streaming down from a skylight. The chairs and other furnishings had been moved back along the walls to make room for the two large easels set up in the middle of the floor. On the right-hand easel rested the Sunset minus its frame, and on the other an empty canvas the same size and shape. As far as I could see it was everything you could want for an artist's studio.

The only incongruous note was an electric oven installed along one wall.

Lovell set his suitcase down and walked over to the easels. He studied the setup for a long minute, then adjusted the painting slightly and stepped back to study it some more. "This will do fine," he said at last. He went back to his suitcase, heaved it up onto a table, and began to unpack. Murphy lounged in the doorway and watched him idly.

Grierson beamed. "Good," he said. He rubbed his hands together. "How long will it take, do you think?"

Lovell paused in his unpacking and shrugged. "A couple of days," he said. "Three or four at the most."

"So soon?" Grierson said, surprised. "Remember, this has to be a perfect copy."

"It will be," Lovell said haughtily. The quality of his work was the one thing he was really touchy about. And the only thing you couldn't shake him on.

I said smoothly, "The actual painting itself doesn't take very long at all, Mr. Grierson. Usually, it's mixing the paints so they match perfectly that gives the most trouble. But since the Sunset is a fairly recent painting, that shouldn't be too much of a problem."

"I see," Grierson said. His eyes shifted toward the oven. "You asked for that, so I got it for

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you. But what's it for?"

"It's used for the aging process," I said. When Grierson looked at me curiously, I went on, "As paint gets older and drier it tends to contract and a network of tiny cracks forms across the surface of the painting." I smiled at him. "You get the same effect," I said, "if you bake a new painting."

"Very interesting," Grierson said, obviously impressed. "And that, I suppose, you use for mixing paints." He nodded to indicate the blender that Lovell had just unpacked.

I laughed. "No," I said. "Lovell uses that to mix his food."

"It's a high-protein milk shake," Lovell said with the sincerity of the true believer. "You start out with a base of honey, add malt and milk powder, eggs, ice cream, soy bean oil—"

Grierson held up a hand, palm out. "Spare me the details," he said. He turned back to me.

"That's about it," I said. "Unless you have some more questions, you can leave us to our own resources."

Grierson regarded me thoughtfully. "I don't think so," he said slowly. "You see, it occurred to me that if your copies are as good as you claim, you could easily make two instead of one, smuggle the original painting out, and leave the museum *and* me holding the bag."

He looked at me expectantly, but I didn't say anything. There were at least a couple of holes in the scheme he'd just outlined, but pointing them out would only confirm his suspicions. So would a denial.

"So," he continued, "the only way I can have peace of mind is to make sure you don't have even the slightest chance of doing that. I thought at first of marking the original in some way. But marks can be found and then erased or duplicated. So I decided that the simplest and best way was to leave Murphy here with you all the time you're doing the painting. I don't think you'd be foolish enough to try anything with him around."

Murphy grinned at me from the doorway, almost as if he wished I would try.

"Suit yourself," I said. I made my voice as offhand and casual as I could.

"I intend to," Grierson said drily. He moved over to the door and paused. "One other thing before I go," he said. "Your sleeping quarters are in the next room. As an added precaution, though, Murphy will sleep here. And I should warn you, he's a very light sleeper."

And with that cheery thought Grierson left us. Murphy closed the door after him and settled down on a straight wooden chair beside it.

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Lovell cast an anxious glance at me.

"You know what we came here to do," I said. "So begin. One more in the audience won't make any difference." That, I hoped, should get the message across to Lovell and yet be natural enough not to alert Murphy.

But from the mocking glint in Murphy's eyes I couldn't be sure.

Lovell looked dubiously from me to Murphy, then turned to the empty canvas, struck his horizon line and began to paint. Within two minutes he was completely absorbed in his work.

That left Murphy and me to amuse ourselves.

"How about a little gin rummy to pass the time?" I said. "Penny a point."

Murphy grunted something I took to mean no.

"Well," I said cheerfully, "if you don't care for gin, how about—"

Murphy grunted again.

It was, I decided, going to be a long three or four days.

And it was. We left the room only to sleep. Our meals were brought in—or rather Murphy's and my meals were brought in. Lovell kept a supply of his high-protein malt mixture standing ready in the blender to be shaken together whenever the need for nourishment moved him. For the rest of the time he labored diligently and silently on the copy.

Murphy's most characteristic pose was sitting next to the door with his chair back propped against the wall and his feet dangling beside the bottom rungs. His eyes were half hooded and seemingly somnolent. And yet I'd have been willing to swear that a gnat couldn't have blinked in that room without Murphy spotting it.

As for me, I wandered aimlessly about the room, fiddling with this or that as the mood struck me.

I had just begun to conclude that Lovell would never finish when he put down his brushes, lifted the copy off its easel, and went to stick the painting in the oven.

Murphy let his chair legs come down with a thud. "Time to call Grierson," he said. "He'll want to see this."

"Not yet," I said. "Something still could go wrong. Better wait until it's through cooking and Lovell's had a chance to check it over."

Murphy settled back in his chair, apparently as stolidly as before. But when I started to move about the room he shouted at me to settle down.

I settled down.

Finally Lovell shut off the heat and, after giving the oven time to cool thoroughly, took the painting out. He had moved the

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original over to the far right-hand side of its easel and now he placed the copy immediately to the left of it and began to go over every square inch of both paintings with a magnifying glass. He took an inordinately long time about it, and Murphy began to fidget more and more. It was comforting to know that he was human enough to have run out of patience as soon as he saw the end in sight.

At last when he could stand it no longer, he burst out irritably, "Aren't you done yet?"

He started to get up, but I forestalled him by crossing casually in front of him and going over to stand beside Lovell. As I stood there peering over his shoulder I let my hand brush lightly against the copy. It was cool to the touch, the last trace of the oven's heat gone. I nodded to Lovell almost imperceptibly.

Lovell straightened up. "All done," he said. He turned from the easel and walked over to his blender. "Go take a look if you like," he said to Murphy over his shoulder as he punched the button to start the machine.

It was an act Lovell had done at least a dozen times since we'd come to Grierson's. But this time the blender top was loose; it flew off and high-protein malt spewed out all over the room. One glob caught Murphy on the side of the face as he stood up.

Fortunately the paintings were at a sharp angle to the machine or they too would have taken the full blast.

Murphy stomped angrily over to the blender and yanked the cord out of its wall socket, sending the machine crashing over. "You jerk," he said, turning on Lovell and drawing back his fist.

Lovell, however, seemed too upset to be frightened. "I don't know how it happened," he complained. "I was sure I put it on tight."

Murphy swung around to face me. "You!" he cried, pointing with his stubby forefinger. "You were fooling around this thing earlier—" His eyes narrowed as a sudden thought took hold of his mind. He pushed past Lovell and covered the distance to the paintings in three quick strides. He stood before them frowning.

"Look, Murphy," I said, "I—"

"Shut up," Murphy said harshly. He continued to study the paintings. Finally a slow grin began to twist his face. He reached up to touch the right edge of the painting to the left. He brought his hand away a second later, rubbing his thumb against the tips of his fingers. The grin broadened.

"All right, wise guy," he said to me, nodding to indicate the wall intercom, "call Grierson."

His eyes gloated over me as I buzzed Grierson in his study and told him the copy was done.

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"Fantastic," Grierson said. "Fantastic." He had come over immediately after my call and now he stood in front of the easel admiring the two paintings. "It's almost as if Glover himself had painted a second Sunset."

"The original's the one on the left, Mr. Grierson," Murphy put in. His eyes flicked over to meet mine and he grinned his malicious grin. "You were right about wise guy here trying something," he went on to Grierson, "but you were wrong when you thought he'd be smart about it. Instead, he tried to pull one of the oldest and dumbest tricks in the book—switching pictures while my attention was distracted."

Grierson regarded me. "Oh?"

"Yeah," Murphy said, obviously enjoying his triumph. "What he did was fix his buddy's blending machine so it would throw goop all over the room as soon as it was turned on. And," he conceded, "it was a neat enough gimmick. The trouble was, some of the goop stuck to the right-hand edge of that painting on the left, the one farthest away from the machine—where it couldn't possibly have gotten unless that painting originally had been on the right, nearest the blender."

Wordlessly, Grierson ran his fingers down the edge of the painting on the left. When he brought them away they were covered with a sticky, malty substance that obviously wasn't paint. He held them out for me to inspect. "How about it, Harry?" he said.

I shrugged. "No point in denying it, I guess," I said.

"None whatsoever," Grierson said. He pulled out a handkerchief and began to scrub the mess off his fingers. "What I don't understand, though, is *why?* What possible advantage did you see for yourself?"

I shrugged again. "None really," I said. "But when you brought Murphy in that made it a challenge. I had to try something."

"I see," Grierson said. He folded the handkerchief neatly and put it back in his pocket.

"You want me to teach them better manners, Mr. Grierson?" Murphy said hopefully.

"No," Grierson said, "I don't think that will be necessary." As he was speaking he was looking at me rather than at Murphy. He went on directly to me, "Needless to say, however, you've just forfeited the rest of your pay."

Needless to say. Actually, though, I could afford to be philosophical about it. I'd figured from the start that somehow he'd planned to beat us out of our money—which was why I'd doubled the price and got half of it in advance.

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Grierson turned back to the paintings. "The ironic thing is," he said, "that Murphy wasn't really necessary. Oh," he went on, flicking a hand at the Sunset on the right, "this is a good enough copy and I'm sure the museum will accept it without question. But—" he picked up the other Sunset "—when you see the two of them together, you can't help but notice the small signs that distinguish the work of a true creative genius from that of a competent hack. If you have the eye for it, that is," he added after a second.

Blood suffused Lovell's face and he began to swell with indignation. I recognized the signs and grabbed him and got out of there fast before he said something that might have made Grierson change his mind about turning Murphy loose on us.

As it was we were barely out of the house when Lovell exploded. "Did you hear that man, Harry?" he said. "Did you hear him?" His voice deepened to mimic Grierson's: " 'The small signs that distinguish the work of a true creative genius . . . If you have the eye for it . . .' " He clamped his hand on my arm, pulling me to a sudden stop. "Harry, I swear he was talking through his hat. There isn't one cent's worth of difference between those paintings and I've a good mind to go back and prove it to him."

I eased his fingers loose from my sleeve with my free hand. "I wouldn't do that if I were you, Lovell," I said. "You see, I didn't switch those paintings. All I did was smear some of your malt mixture along the one edge where Murphy was sure to see it and *think* I had pulled a switch.

"That was your painting Grierson was praising."

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a *NEW* detective *NOVELET* by

JAMES POWELL

Once again James Powell surprises. Once again Mr. Powell does the expected—that is, he does the unexpected. *Once again Mr. Powell writes a story altogether different from any of his previous stories—indeed, different from* anybody's *previous stories.*

Here, then, is perhaps the most unusual Christmas story you have ever read, perhaps the most unusual Christmas mystery ever written. But please—please!—don't be completely taken in by the whimsy. There is more here, much more, than meets the eye.

What!? A plot to assassinate Santa Claus?! Santa Claus?!? . . .

THE PLOT AGAINST SANTA CLAUS

by JAMES POWELL

RORY BIGTOES, SANTA'S SECURITY Chief, was tall for an elf, measuring almost seven inches from the curly tips of his shoes to the top of his fedora. But he had to stride to keep abreast of Garth Hardnoggin, the quick little Director General of the Toyworks, as they hurried, beards streaming back over their shoulders, through the racket and bustle of Shop Number 5, one of the many vaulted caverns honeycombing the undiscovered island beneath the Polar icecap.

Director General Hardnoggin wasn't pleased. He slapped his megaphone, the symbol of his office (for as a member of the Board he spoke directly to Santa Claus), against his thigh. "A bomb in the Board Room on Christmas Eve!" he muttered with angry disbelief.

"I'll admit that Security doesn't look good," said Bigtoes.

Hardnoggin gave a snort and stopped at a construction site for Dick and Jane Doll dollhouses. Elf carpenters and painters were

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hard at work, pipes in their jaws and beards tucked into their belts. A foreman darted over to show Hardnoggin the wallpaper samples for the dining room.

"See this unit, Bigtoes?" said Hardnoggin. "Split-level r a n c h type. Wall-to-wall c a r p e t i n g. Breakfast nook. Your choice of Early American or French Provincial furnishings. They said I couldn't build it for the price. But I did. And how did I do it?"

"Cardboard," said a passing elf, an old carpenter with a plank over his shoulder.

"And what's wrong w i t h cardboard? G o o d substantial cardboard for the interior walls!" shouted the Director G e n e r a l striding off again. "Let them bellyache, Bigtoes. I'm not out to win any popularity contests. But I do my job. Let's see you do yours. Find Dirk Crouchback and find him fast."

At the automotive section the new Lazaretto sports cars (1/32 scale) were coming off t h e assembly line. Hardnoggin stopped to slam one of the car doors. "You left out the *kachunk,*" he told an elf engineer in white cover-alls.

"Nobody gets a tin door to go *kachunk,*" said the engineer.

"Detroit does. So can we," said Hardnoggin, moving on. "You think I don't miss the good old days, Bigtoes?" he said. "I was a spinner. And a damn good one. Nobody made a top that could spin as long and smooth as Garth Hardnoggin's."

"I was a jacksmith myself," said Bigtoes. Satisfying w o r k, building each jack-in-the-box from the ground up, carpentering the box, rigging the spring mechanism, making the funny head, spreading each careful coat of paint.

"How many could you make in a week?" asked D i r e c t o r General Hardnoggin.

"Three, with overtime," said Security Chief Bigtoes.

Hardnoggin nodded. "And how many children had empty stockings on Christmas morning because we couldn't h a n d c r a f t enough stuff to go around? That's where your Ghengis Khans, your Hitlers, and your Stalins come from, Bigtoes—children w h o through no fault of their own didn't get any toys for Christmas. So Santa had to make a policy decision: quality or quantity? He opted for quantity."

Crouchback, at that time one of Santa's right-hand elves, had blamed the decision on Hardnoggin's sinister influence. By way of protest he had placed a bomb in the new plastic machine. The explosion had coated three elves with a thick layer of plastic which had to be chipped off with hammers and chisels. Of course they lost their beards. Santa, who was

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particularly sensitive about beards, sentenced Crouchback to two years in the cooler, as the elves called it. This meant he was assigned to a refrigerator (one in Ottawa, Canada, as it happened) with the responsibility of turning the light on and off as the door was opened or closed.

But after a month Crouchback had failed to answer the daily roll call which Security made by means of a two-way intercom system. He had fled the refrigerator and become a renegade elf. Then suddenly, three years later, Crouchback had reappeared at the North Pole, a shadowy fugitive figure, editor of a clandestine newspaper, *The Midnight Elf,* which made violent attacks on Director General Hardnoggin and his policies. More recently, Crouchback had become the leader of SHAFT—Santa's Helpers Against Flimsy Toys—an organization of dissident groups including the Anti-Plastic League, the Sons and Daughters of the Good Old Days, the Ban the Toy-Bomb people and the Hippie Elves for Peace . . .

"Santa opted for quantity," repeated Hardnoggin. "And I carried out his decision. Just between the two of us it hasn't always been easy." Hardnoggin waved his megaphone at the Pacification and Rehabilitation section where thousands of toy bacteriological warfare kits (JiffyPox) were being converted to civilian use (The Freckle Machine). After years of pondering Santa had finally ordered a halt to war-toy production. His decision was considered a victory for SHAFT and a defeat for Hardnoggin.

"Unilateral disarmament is a mistake, Bigtoes," said Hardnoggin grimly as they passed through a door marked *Santa's Executive Helpers Only* and into the carpeted world of the front office. "Mark my words, right now the tanks and planes are rolling off the assembly lines at Acme Toy and into the department stores." (Acme Toy, the international consortium of toymakers, was the elves' greatest bugbear.) "So the rich kids will have war toys, while the poor kids won't even have a popgun. That's not democratic."

Bigtoes stopped at a door marked *Security*. Hardnoggin strode on without slackening his pace. "Sticks-and-Stones session at five o'clock," he said over his shoulder. "Don't be late. And do your job. Find Crouchback!"

Dejected, Bigtoes slumped down at his desk, receiving a sympathetic smile from Charity Nosegay, his little blonde blue-eyed secretary. Charity was a recent acquisition and Bigtoes had intended to make a play for her once the Sticks-and-Stones paperwork was out of the way. (Security had to prepare a report

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for Santa on each alleged naughty boy and girl.) Now that play would have to wait.

Bigtoes sighed. Security looked bad. Bigtoes had even been warned. The night before, a battered and broken elf had crawled into his office, gasped, "He's going to kill Santa," and died. It was Darby Shortribs who had once been a brilliant doll designer. But then one day he had decided that if war toys encouraged little boys to become soldiers when they grew up, then dolls encouraged little girls to become mothers, contributing to overpopulation. So Shortribs had joined SHAFT and risen to membership on its Central Committee.

The trail of Shortribs' blood had led to the Quality Control lab and the Endurance Machine which simulated the brutal punishment, the bashing, crushing, and kicking that a toy receives at the hands of a four-year-old (or two two-year-olds). A hell of a way for an elf to die!

After Shortribs' warning, Bigtoes had alerted his Security elves and sent a flying squad after Crouchback. But the SHAFT leader had disappeared. The next morning a bomb had exploded in the Board Room.

On the top of Bigtoes' desk were the remains of that bomb. Small enough to fit into an elf's briefcase, it had been placed under the Board Room table, just at Santa's feet. If Owen Brassbottom, Santa's Traffic Manager, hadn't chosen just that moment to usher the jolly old man into the Map Room to pinpoint the spot where, with the permission and blessing of the Strategic Air Command, Santa's sleigh and reindeer were to penetrate the DEW Line, there wouldn't have been much left of Santa from the waist down. Seconds before the bomb went off, Director General Hardnoggin had been called from the room to take a private phone call. Fergus Bandylegs, Vice-President of Santa Enterprises, Inc., had just gone down to the other end of the table to discuss something with Tom Thumbskin, Santa's Creative Head, and escaped the blast. But Thumbskin had to be sent to the hospital with a concussion when his chair—the elves sat on high chairs with ladders up the side like those used by lifeguards—was knocked over backward by the explosion.

All this was important, for the room had been searched before the meeting and found safe. So the bomb must have been brought in by a member of the Board. It certainly hadn't been Traffic Manager Brassbottom who had saved Santa, and probably not Thumbskin. That left Director General Hardnoggin and Vice-President Bandylegs . . .

"Any luck checking out that personal phone call Hardnoggin

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received just before the bomb went off?" asked Bigtoes.

Charity shook her golden locks. "The switchboard operator fainted right after she took the call. She's still out cold."

Leaving the Toyworks, Bigtoes walked quickly down a corridor lined with expensive boutiques and fashionable restaurants. On one wall of Mademoiselle Fanny's Salon of Haute Couture some SHAFT elf had written: *Santa, Si! Hardnoggin, No!* On one wall of the Hotel St. Nicholas some Hardnoggin backer had written: *Support Your Local Director General!* Bigtoes was no philosopher and the social unrest that was racking the North Pole confused him. Once, in disguise, he had attended a SHAFT rally in The Underwood, that vast and forbidding cavern of phosphorescent stinkhorn and hanging roots. Gathered beneath an immense picture of Santa were hippie elves with their beards tied in outlandish knots, matron-lady elves in sensible shoes, tweedy elves and green-collar elves.

Crouchback himself had made a surprise appearance, coming out of hiding to deliver his now famous "Plastic Lives!" speech. "Hardnoggin says plastic is inanimate. But I say that plastic lives! Plastic infects all it touches and spreads like crab grass in the innocent souls of little children. Plastic toys make plastic girls and boys!" Crouchback drew himself up to his full six inches. "I say: quality—quality now!" The crowd roared his words back at him. The meeting closed with all the elves joining hands and singing "We Shall Overcome." It had been a moving experience . . .

As he expected, Bigtoes found Bandylegs at the Hotel St. Nicholas bar, staring morosely down into a thimble-mug of ale. Fergus Bandylegs was a dapper, fast-talking elf with a chestnut beard which he scented with lavender. As Vice-President of Santa Enterprises, Inc., he was in charge of financing the entire Toyworks operation by arranging for Santa to appear in advertising campaigns, by collecting royalties on the use of the jolly old man's name, and by leasing Santa suits to department stores.

Bandylegs ordered a drink for the Security Chief. Their friendship went back to Rory Bigtoes' jacksmith days when Bandylegs had been a master sledwright. "These are topsy-turvy times, Rory," said Bandylegs. "First there's that bomb and now Santa's turned down the Jolly Roger cigarette account. For years now they've had this ad campaign showing Santa slipping a carton of Jolly Rogers into Christmas stockings. But not any more. 'Smoking may be hazardous to your health,' says Santa."

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"Santa knows best," said Bigtoes.

"Granted," said Bandylegs. "But counting television residuals, that's a cool two million sugar plums thrown out the window." (At the current rate of exchange there are 4.27 sugar plums to the U.S. dollar.) "Hardnoggin's already on my back to make up the loss. Nothing must interfere with his grand plan for automating the Toyworks. So it's off to Madison Avenue again. Sure I'll stay at the Plaza and eat at the Chambord, but I'll still get homesick."

The Vice-President smiled sadly. "Do you know what I used to do? There's this guy who stands outside Grand Central Station selling those little mechanical men you wind up and they march around. I used to march around with them. It made me feel better somehow. But now they remind me of Hardnoggin. He's a machine, Rory, and he wants to make all of us into machines."

"What about the bomb?" asked Bigtoes.

Bandylegs shrugged. "Acme Toy, I suppose."

Bigtoes shook his head. Acme Toy hadn't slipped an elf spy into the North Pole for months. "What about Crouchback?"

"No," said Bandylegs firmly. "I'll level with you, Rory. I had a get-together with Crouchback just last week. He wanted to get my thoughts on the quality-versus-quantity question and on the future of the Toyworks. Maybe I'm wrong, but I got the impression that a top-level shake-up is in the works with Crouchback slated to become the new Director General. In any event I found him a very perceptive and understanding elf."

Bandylegs smiled and went on, "Darby Shortribs was there, prattling on against dolls. As I left, Crouchback shook my hand and whispered, 'Every movement needs its lunatic fringe, Bandylegs. Shortribs is ours.'" Bandylegs lowered his voice. "I'm tired of the grown-up ratrace, Rory. I want to get back to the sled shed and make Blue Streaks and High Flyers again. I'll never get there with Hardnoggin and his modern ideas at the helm."

Bigtoes pulled at his beard. It was common knowledge that Crouchback had an elf spy on the Board. The reports on the meetings in *The Midnight Elf* were just too complete. Was it his friend Bandylegs? But would Bandylegs try to kill Santa?

That brought Bigtoes back to Hardnoggin again. But cautiously. As Security Chief, Bigtoes had to be objective. Yet he yearned to prove Hardnoggin the villain. This, as he knew, was because of the beautiful Carlotta Peachfuzz, beloved by children all around the world. As the voice

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of the Peachy Pippin Doll, Carlotta was the most envied female at the North Pole, next to Mrs. Santa. Girl elves followed her glamorous exploits in the press. Male elves had Peachy Pippin Dolls propped beside their beds so they could fall asleep with Carlotta's sultry voice saying: "Hello, I'm your talking Peachy Pippin Doll. I love you. I love you. I love you . . ."

But once it had just been Rory and Carlotta, Carlotta and Rory—until the day Bigtoes had introduced her to Hardnoggin. "You have a beautiful voice, Miss Peachfuzz," the Director General had said. "Have you ever considered being in the talkies?" So Carlotta had dropped Bigtoes for Hardnoggin and risen to stardom in the talking-doll industry. But her liaison with Director General Hardnoggin had become so notorious that a dutiful Santa—with Mrs. Santa present—had had to read the riot act about executive hanky-panky. Hardnoggin had broken off the relationship. Disgruntled, Carlotta had become active with SHAFT, only to leave after a violent argument with Shortribs over his anti-doll position.

Today Bigtoes couldn't care less about Carlotta. But he still had that old score to settle with the Director General.

Leaving the fashionable section behind, Bigtoes turned down Apple Alley, a residential corridor of modest, old-fashioned houses with thatched roofs and carved beams. Here the mushrooms were in full bloom—the stropharia, inocybe, and chanterelle—dotting the corridor with indigo, vermilion, and many yellows. Elf householders were out troweling in their gardens. Elf wives gossiped over hedges of gypsy pholiota. Somewhere an old elf was singing one of the ancient work songs, accompanying himself on a concertina. Until Director General Hardnoggin discovered that it slowed down production, the elves had always sung while they worked, beating out the time with their hammers; now the foremen passed out song sheets and led them in song twice a day. But it wasn't the same thing.

Elf gardeners looked up, took their pipes from their mouths, and watched Bigtoes pass. They regarded all front-office people with suspicion—even this big elf with the candy-stripe rosette of the Order of Santa, First Class, in his buttonhole.

Bigtoes had won the decoration many years ago when he was a young Security elf, still wet behind his pointed ears. Somehow on that fateful day, Billy Roy Scoggins, President of Acme Toy, had found the secret entrance to the North Pole and appeared suddenly in

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parka and snowshoes, demanding to see Santa Claus. Santa arrived, jolly and smiling, surrounded by Bigtoes and the other Security elves. Scoggins announced he had a proposition "from one hard-headed businessman to another."

Pointing out the foolishness of competition, the intruder had offered Santa a king's ransom to come in with Acme Toy. "Ho, ho, ho," boomed Santa with jovial firmness, "that isn't Santa's way." Scoggins—perhaps it was the "ho, ho, ho" that did it—turned purple and threw a punch that floored the jolly old man. Security sprang into action.

Four elves had died as Scoggins flayed at them, a snowshoe in one hand and a rolled up copy of *The Wall Street Journal* in the other. But Bigtoes had crawled up the outside of Scoggins' pantleg. It had taken him twelve karate chops to break the intruder's kneecap and send him crashing to the ground like a stricken tree. To this day the President of Acme Toy walks with a cane and curses Rory Bigtoes whenever it rains.

As Bigtoes passed a tavern—The Bowling Green, with a huge horse mushroom shading the door—someone inside banged down a thimble-mug and shouted the famous elf toast: "My Santa, right or wrong! May he always be right, but right or wrong, my Santa!" Bigtoes sighed. Life should be so simple for elves. They all loved Santa—what did it matter that he used blueing when he washed his beard, or liked to sleep late, or hit the martinis a bit too hard—and they all wanted to do what was best for good little girls and boys. But here the agreement ended. Here the split between Hardnoggin and Crouchback—between the Establishment and the revolutionary—took over.

Beyond the tavern was a crossroads, the left corridor leading to the immense storage areas for completed toys, the right corridor to The Underwood. Bigtoes continued straight and was soon entering that intersection of corridors called Pumpkin Corners, the North Pole's bohemian quarter. Here, until his disappearance, the SHAFT leader Crouchback had lived with relative impunity, protected by the inhabitants. For this was SHAFT country. A special edition of *The Midnight Elf* was already on the streets denying that SHAFT was involved in the assassination attempt on Santa. A love-bead vendor, his beard tied in a sheepshank, had *Hardnoggin Is a Dwarf* written across the side of his pushcart. *Make love, not plastic* declared the wall of The Electric Carrot, a popular discotheque and hippie hangout.

The Electric Carrot was crowded with elves dancing the latest craze, the Scalywag. Until

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recently, dancing hadn't been popular with elves. They kept stepping on their beards. The hippie knots effectively eliminated that stumbling block.

Buck Withers, leader of the Hippie Elves for Peace, was sitting in a corner wearing a *Santa Is Love* button. Bigtoes had once dropped a first-offense drug charge against Withers and three other elves caught nibbling on morning-glory seeds. "Where's Crouchback, Buck?" said Bigtoes.

"Like who's asking?" said Withers. "The head of Hardnoggin's Gestapo?"

"A friend," said Bigtoes.

"Friend, like when the news broke about Shortribs, he says 'I'm next, Buck.' Better fled than dead, and he split for parts unknown."

"It looks bad, Buck."

"Listen, friend," said Withers, "SHAFT's the wave of the future. Like Santa's already come over to our side on the disarmament thing. What do we need with bombs? That's a bad scene, friend. Violence isn't SHAFT's bag."

As Bigtoes left The Electric Carrot a voice said, "I wonder, my dear sir, if you could help an unfortunate elf." Bigtoes turned to find a tattered derelict in a filthy button-down shirt and greasy gray-flannel suit. His beard was matted with twigs and straw.

"Hello, Baldwin," said Bigtoes. Baldwin Redpate had once been the head of Santa's Shipping Department. Then came the Slugger Nolan Official Baseball Mitt Scandal. The mitt had been a big item one year, much requested in letters to Santa. Through some gigantic snafu in Shipping, thousands of inflatable rubber ducks had been sent out instead. For months afterward, Santa received letters from indignant little boys, and though each one cut him like a knife he never reproached Redpate. But Redpate knew he had failed Santa. He brooded, had attacks of silent crying, and finally took to drink, falling so much under the spell of bee wine that Hardnoggin had to insist he resign.

"Rory, you're just the elf I'm looking for," said Redpate. "Have you ever seen an elf skulking? Well, I have."

Bigtoes was interested. Elves were straightforward creatures. They didn't skulk.

"Last night I woke up in a cold sweat and saw strange things, Rory," said Redpate. "Comings and goings, lights, skulking." Large tears rolled down Redpate's cheeks. "You see, I get these nightmares, Rory. Thousands of inflatable rubber ducks come marching across my body and their eyes are Santa's eyes when someone's let him down." He leaned toward Bigtoes confidentially. "I may be a washout. Occasionally I may even drink too

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much. But I don't skulk!" Redpate began to cry again.

His tears looked endless. Bigtoes was due at the Sticks-and-Stones session. He slipped Redpate ten sugar plums. "Got to go, Baldwin."

Redpate dabbed at the tears with the dusty end of his beard. "When you see Santa, ask him to think kindly of old Baldy Redpate," he sniffed and headed straight for The Good Gray Goose, the tavern across the street—making a beeline for the bee wine, as the elves would say. But then he turned. "Strange goings-on," he called. "Storeroom Number 14, Unit 24, Row 58. Skulking."

"Hardnoggin's phone call was from Carlotta Peachfuzz," said Charity, looking lovelier than ever. "The switchboard operator is a big Carlotta fan. She fainted when she recognized her voice. The thrill was just too much."

Interesting. In spite of Santa's orders, were Carlotta and Hardnoggin back together on the sly? If so, had they conspired on the bomb attempt? Or had it really been Carlotta's voice? Carlotta Peachfuzz impersonations were a dime a dozen.

"Get me the switchboard operator," said Bigtoes and returned to stuffing Sticks-and-Stones reports into his briefcase.

"No luck," said Charity, putting down the phone. "She just took another call and fainted again."

Vice-President Bandylegs looked quite pleased with himself and threw Bigtoes a wink. "Don't be surprised when I cut out of Sticks-and-Stones early, Rory," he smiled. "An affair of the heart. All of a sudden the old Bandylegs charm has come through again. He nodded down the hall at Hardnoggin, waiting impatiently at the Projection Room door. "When the cat's away, the mice will play."

The Projection Room was built like a movie theater. "Come over here beside Santa, Rory, my boy," boomed the jolly old man. So Bigtoes scrambled up into a tiny seat hooked over the back of the seat on Santa's left. On Bigtoes' left sat Traffic Manager Brassbottom, Vice-President Bandylegs, and Director General Hardnoggin. In this way Mrs. Santa, at the portable bar against the wall, could send Santa's martinis to him down an assembly line of elves.

Confident that no one would dare to try anything with Santa's Security Chief present, Bigtoes listened to the Traffic Manager, a red-lipped elf with a straw-colored beard, talk enthusiastically about the television coverage planned for Santa's trip. This year, live and in color via satellite, the

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North Pole would see Santa's arrival at each stop on his journey. Santa's first martini was passed from Hardnoggin to Bandylegs to Brassbottom to Bigtoes. The Security Chief grasped the stem of the glass in both hands and, avoiding the heady gin fumes as best he could, passed it to Santa.

"All right," said Santa, taking his first sip, "let's roll 'em, starting with the worst."

The lights dimmed. A film appeared on the screen. "Waldo Rogers, age five," said Bigtoes. "Mistreatment of pets, eight demerits." (The film showed a smirking little boy pulling a cat's tail.) "Not coming when he's called, ten demerits." (The film showed Waldo's mother at the screen door, shouting.) "Also, as an indication of his general bad behavior, he gets his mother to buy Sugar Gizmos but he won't eat them. He just wants the box-tops." (The camera panned a pantry shelf crowded with opened Sugar Gizmo boxes.) The elves clucked disapprovingly.

"Waldo Rogers certainly isn't Santa's idea of a nice little boy," said Santa. "What do you think, Mother?" Mrs. Santa agreed.

"Sticks-and-stones then?" asked Hardnoggin hopefully.

But the jolly old man hesitated. "Santa always likes to check the list twice before deciding," he said.

Hardnoggin groaned. Santa was always bollixing up his production schedules by going easy on bad little girls and boys.

A new film began. "Next on the list," said Bigtoes, "is Nancy Ruth Ashley, age four and a half . . ."

Two hours and seven martinis later, Santa's jolly laughter and Mrs. Santa's giggles filled the room. "She's a little dickens, that one," chuckled Santa as they watched a six-year-old fill her father's custom-made shoes with molasses, "but Santa will find a little something for her." Hardnoggin groaned. That was the end of the list and so far no one had been given sticks-and-stones. They rolled the film on Waldo Rogers again. "Santa understands some cats like having their tails pulled," chuckled Santa as he drained his glass. "And what the heck are Sugar Gizmos?"

Bandylegs, who had just excused himself from the meeting, paused on his way up the aisle. "They're a delicious blend of toasted oats and corn," he shouted, "with an energy-packed coating of sparkling sugar. As a matter of fact, Santa, the Gizmo people are thinking of featuring you in their new advertising campaign. It would be a great selling point if I could say that Santa had given a little boy sticks-and-stones because he wouldn't eat his Sugar Gizmos."

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"Here now, Fergy," said the jolly old man, "you know that isn't Santa's way."

Bandylegs left, muttering to himself.

"Santa," protested Hardnoggin as the jolly old man passed his glass down the line for a refill, "let's be realistic. If we can't draw the line at Waldo Rogers, where can we?"

Santa reflected for a moment. "Suppose Santa let you make the decision, Garth, my boy. What would little Waldo Rogers find in his stocking on Christmas morning?"

Hardnoggin hesitated. Then he said, "Sticks-and-stones."

Santa looked disappointed. "So be it," he said.

The lights dimmed again as they continued their review of the list. Santa's eighth martini came down the line from elf to elf. As Bigtoes passed it to Santa, the fumes caught him—the smell of gin and something else. Bitter almonds. He struck the glass from Santa's hand.

Silent and dimly lit, Storeroom Number 14 seemed an immense, dull suburb of split-level, ranch-type Dick and Jane Doll dollhouses. Bigtoes stepped into the papier-mâché shrubbery fronting Unit 24, Row 58 as an elf watchman on a bicycle pedaled by singing "Colossal Carlotta," a current hit song. Bigtoes hoped he hadn't made a mistake by refraining from picking Hardnoggin up.

Bandylegs had left before the cyanide was put in the glass. Mrs. Santa, of course, was above suspicion. So that left Director General Hardnoggin and Traffic Manager Brassbottom. But why would Brassbottom first save Santa from the bomb only to poison him later? So that left Hardnoggin. Bigtoes had been eager to act on this logic, perhaps too eager. He wanted no one to say that Santa's Security Chief had let personal feelings color his judgment. Bigtoes would be fair.

Hardnoggin had insisted that Crouchback was the villain. All right, he would bring Crouchback in for questioning. After all, Santa was now safe, napping under a heavy guard in preparation for his all-night trip. Hardnoggin—if *he* was the villain—could do him no harm for the present.

As Bigtoes crept up the fabric lawn on all fours, the front door of the dollhouse opened and a shadowy figure came down the walk. It paused at the street, looked this way and that, then disappeared into the darkness. Redpate had been right about the skulking. But it wasn't Crouchback—Bigtoes was sure of that.

The Security Chief climbed in through a dining-room window. In the living room were three elves, one on the couch, one in

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an easy chair, and, behind the bar, Dirk Crouchback, a distinguished-looking elf with a salt-and-pepper beard and graying temples. The leader of SHAFT poured himself a drink and turned. "Welcome to my l i t t l e ménage-à-trois, Rory Bigtoes," he said with a surprised smile. The two other elves turned out to be Dick and Jane dolls.

"I'm taking you in, Crouchback," said the Security Chief.

The revolutionary came out from behind the bar pushing a .55mm. howitzer (1/32 scale) with his foot. "I'm sorry about this," he said. "As you know, we are opposed to the use of violence. But I'd rather not fall into Hardnoggin's hands just now. Sit over there by Jane." Bigtoes obeyed. At that short range the howitzer's plastic shell could be fatal to an elf.

Crouchback sat down on the arm of Dick's easy chair. "Yes," he said, "Hardnoggin's days are numbered. But as the incidents of last night and today illustrate, the Old Order dies hard. I'd rather not be one of its victims."

Crouchback paused and took a drink. "Look at this room, Bigtoes. This is Hardnoggin's world. Wall-to-wall carpeting. Breakfast nooks. Cheap materials. Shoddy workmanship." He picked up an end table and dropped it on the floor. Two of the legs broke. "Plastic," said Crouchback contemptuously, flinging the table through the plastic television set. "It's the w h o l e middle-class, bourgeois, suburban scene." Crouchback put the heel of his hand on Dick's jaw and pushed the doll over. "Is this vapid plastic nonentity the kind of grownup we want little boys and girls to become?"

"No," said Bigtoes. "But what's your alternative?"

"Close down the Toyworks for a few years," said Crouchback earnestly. "Relearn our ancient heritage of handcrafted toys. We owe it to millions of little boys and girls as yet unborn!"

"All very idealistic," said Bigtoes, "but—"

"Practical, Bigtoes. And down to earth," said the SHAFT leader, tapping his head. "The plan's all here."

"But what about Acme Toy?" protested Bigtoes. "The rich kids would still get presents and the poor kids wouldn't."

Crouchback smiled. "I can't go into the details now. But my plan includes the elimination of Acme Toy."

"Suppose you could," said Bigtoes. "We still couldn't handcraft enough toys to keep pace with the population explosion."

"Not at first," said Crouchback. "But suppose population growth was not allowed to exceed our rate of toy production?" He tapped his head again.

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"But good grief," said Bigtoes, "closing down the Toyworks means millions of children with empty stockings on Christmas. Who could be that cruel?"

"Cruel?" exclaimed Crouchback. "Bigtoes, do you know how a grownup cooks a live lobster? Some drop it into boiling water. But others say, 'How cruel!' They drop it in cold water and then bring the water to a boil slowly. No, Bigtoes, we have to bite the bullet. Granted there'll be no Christmas toys for a few years. But we'd fill children's stockings with literature explaining what's going on and with discussion-group outlines so they can get together and talk up the importance of sacrificing their Christmas toys today so the children of the future can have quality handcrafted toys. They'll understand."

Before Bigtoes could protest again, Crouchback got to his feet. "Now that I've given you some food for thought I have to go," he said. "That closet should hold you until I make my escape."

Bigtoes was in the closet for more than an hour. The door proved stronger than he had expected. Then he remembered Hardnoggin's cardboard interior walls and karate-chopped his way through the back of the closet and out into the kitchen.

Security headquarters was a flurry of excitement as Bigtoes strode in the door. "They just caught Hardnoggin trying to put a bomb on Santa's sleigh," said Charity, her voice shaking.

Bigtoes passed through to the Interrogation Room where Hardnoggin, gray and haggard, sat with his wrists between his knees. The Security elves hadn't handled him gently. One eye was swollen, his beard was in disarray, and there was a dent in his megaphone. "It was a Christmas present for that little beast, Waldo Rogers," shouted Hardnoggin.

"A bomb?" said Bigtoes.

"It was supposed to be a little fire engine," shouted the Director General, "with a bell that goes clang-clang!" Hardnoggin struggled to control himself. "I just couldn't be responsible for that little monster finding nothing in his stocking but sticks-and-stones. But a busy man hasn't time for last-minute shopping. I got a—a friend to pick something out for me."

"Who?" said Bigtoes.

Hardnoggin hung his head. "I demand to be taken to Santa Claus," he said. But Santa, under guard, had already left his apartment for the formal departure ceremony.

Bigtoes ordered Hardnoggin detained and hurried to meet Santa at the elevator. He would have enjoyed shouting up at the jolly old man that Hardnoggin was the

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culprit. But of course that just didn't hold water. Hardnoggin was too smart to believe he could just walk up and put a bomb on Santa's sleigh. Or—now that Bigtoes thought about it—to finger himself so obviously by waiting until Bandylegs had left the Sticks-and-Stones session before poisoning Santa's glass.

The villain now seemed to be the beautiful and glamorous Carlotta Peachfuzz. Here's the way it figured: Carlotta phones Hardnoggin just before the bomb goes off in the Board Room, thus making him a prime suspect; Carlotta makes a rendezvous with Bandylegs that causes him to leave Sticks-and-Stones, thus again making Hardnoggin Suspect Number One; then when Bigtoes fails to pick up the Director General, Carlotta talks him into giving little Waldo Rogers a present that turns out to be a bomb. Her object? To frame Hardnoggin for the murder or attempted murder of Santa. Her elf spy? Traffic Manager Brassbottom. It all worked out—or seemed to . . .

Bigtoes met Santa at the elevator surrounded by a dozen Security elves. The jolly old eyes were bloodshot, his smile slightly strained. "Easy does it, Billy," said Santa to Billy Brisket, the Security elf at the elevator controls. "Santa's a bit hungover."

Bigtoes moved to the rear of the elevator. So it was Brassbottom who had planted the bomb and then deliberately taken Santa out of the room. So it was Brassbottom who had poisoned the martini with cyanide, knowing that Bigtoes would detect the smell. And it was Carlotta who had gift-wrapped the bomb. All to frame Hardnoggin. And yet . . . Bigtoes sighed at his own confusion. And yet a dying Shortribs had said that someone was going to kill Santa.

As the elevator eased up into the interior of the Polar icecap, Bigtoes focused his mind on Shortribs. Suppose the dead elf had stumbled on your well-laid plan to kill Santa. Suppose you botched Shortribs' murder and therefore knew that Security had been alerted. What would you do? Stage three fake attempts on Santa's life to provide Security with a culprit, hoping to get Security to drop its guard? Possibly. But the bomb in the Board Room could have killed Santa. Why not just do it that way?

The elevator reached the surface and the first floor of the Control Tower building which was ingeniously camouflaged as an icy crag. But suppose, thought Bigtoes, it was important that you kill Santa in a certain way—say, with half the North Pole looking on?

More Security elves were waiting when the elevator doors open-

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ed. Bigtoes moved quickly among them, urging the utmost vigilance. Then Santa and his party stepped out onto the frozen runway to be greeted by thousands of cheering elves. Hippie elves from Pumpkin Corners, green-collar elves from the Toyworks, young elves and old had all gathered there to wish the jolly old man godspeed.

Santa's smile boardened and he waved to the crowd. Then everybody stood at attention and doffed their hats as the massed bands of the Mushroom Fanciers Association, Wade Snoot conducting, broke into "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town." When the music reached its stirring conclusion, Santa, escorted by a flying wedge of Security elves, made his way through the exuberant crowd and toward his sleigh.

Bigtoes' eyes kept darting everywhere, searching for a happy face that might mask a homicidal intent. His heart almost stopped when Santa paused to accept a bouquet from an elf child who stuttered through a tribute in verse to the jolly old man. It almost stopped again when Santa leaned over the Security cordon to speak to some elf in the crowd. A pat on the head from Santa and even Roger Chinwhiskers, leader of the Sons and Daughters of the Good Old Days, grinned and admitted that perhaps the world wasn't going to hell in a handbasket. A kind word from Santa and Baldwin Redpate tearfully announced—as he did every year at that time—that he was off the bee wine for good.

After what seemed an eternity to Bigtoes, they reached the sleigh. Santa got on board, gave one last wave to the crowd, and called to his eight tiny reindeer, one by one, by name. The reindeer leaned against the harness and the sleigh, with Security elves trotting alongside, and slid forward on the ice. Then four of the reindeer were airborne. Then the other four. At last the sleigh itself left the ground. Santa gained altitude, circled the runway once, and was gone. But they heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight: "Happy Christmas to all and to all a good night!"

The crowd dispersed quickly. Only Bigtoes remained on the wind-swept runway. He walked back and forth, head down, kicking at the snow. Santa's departure had gone off without a hitch. Had the Security Chief been wrong about the frame-up? Had Hardnoggin been trying to kill Santa after all? Bigtoes went over the three attempts again. The bomb in the Board Room. The poison. The bomb on the sleigh.

Suddenly Bigtoes broke into a run.

He had remembered Brass-

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bottom's pretext for taking Santa into the Map Room.

Taking the steps three at a time, Bigtoes burst into the Control Room. Crouchback was standing over the remains of the radio equipment with a monkey wrench in his hand. "Too late, Bigtoes," he said triumphantly. "Santa's as good as dead."

Bigtoes grabbed the phone and ordered the operator to put through an emergency call to the Strategic Air Command in Denver, Colorado. But the telephone cable had been cut. "Baby Polar bears like to teethe on it," said the operator.

Santa Claus was doomed. There was no way to call him back or to warn the Americans.

Crouchback smiled. "In eleven minutes Santa will pass over the DEW Line. But at the wrong place, thanks to Traffic Manager Brassbottom. The American ground-to-air missiles will make short work of him."

"But why?" demanded Bigtoes.

"Nothing destroys a dissident movement like a modest success or two," said Crouchback. "Ever since Santa came out for unilateral disarmament, I've felt SHAFT coming apart in my hands. So I had to act. I've nothing against Santa personally, bourgeois sentimentalist that he is. But his death will be a great step forward in our task of forming better children for a better world. What do you think will happen when Santa is shot down by American missiles?"

Bigtoes shaded his eyes. His voice was thick with emotion. "Every good little boy and girl in the world will be up in arms. A Children's Crusade against the United States."

"And with the Americans disposed of, what nation will become the dominant force in the world?" said Crouchback.

"So that's it—you're a Marxist-Leninist elf!" shouted Bigtoes.

"No!" said Crouchback sharply. "But I'll use the Russians to achieve a better world. Who else could eliminate Acme Toy? Who else could limit world population to our rate of toy production? And they have agreed to that in writing, Bigtoes. Oh, I know the Russians are grownups too and just as corrupt as the rest of the grownups. But once the kids have had the plastic flushed out of their systems and are back on quality hand-crafted toys, I, Dirk Crouchback, the New Santa Claus, with the beautiful and beloved Carlotta Peachfuzz at my side as the New Mrs. Santa, will handle the Russians."

"What about Brassbottom?" asked Bigtoes contemptuously.

"Brassbottom will be Assistant New Santa," said Crouchback quickly, annoyed at the interruption. "Yes," he continued, "the

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New Santa Claus will speak to the children of the world and tell them one thing: Don't t r u s t anyone over thirty inches tall. And that will be the dawning of a new era full of happy laughing children, where grownups will be irrelevant and just wither away!"

"You're mad, Crouchback. I'm taking you in," said Bigtoes.

"I'll offer no resistance," said Crouchback. "But five minutes after Santa fails to appear at his first pit stop, a special edition of *The Midnight Elf* will hit the streets announcing that he has been the victim of a conspiracy between Hardnoggin and the CIA. The same mob of angry elves that breaks into Security headquarters to tear Hardnoggin limb from limb will also free Dirk Crouchback and p r o c l a i m him their new leader. I've laid the groundwork well. A k n o w i n g smile here, an innuendo there, and now many elves inside SHAFT and out believe that on his return Santa intended to make m e Director General."

Crouchback smiled. "Ironically enough, I'd never have learned to be so devious if you Security people hadn't fouled up your own plans and assigned me to a refrigerator in the Russian Embassy in Ottawa. Ever since they found a CIA listening device in their smoked sturgeon, t h e Russians had been keeping a sharp eye open. They nabbed me almost at once and flew me to Moscow in a diplomatic pouch. When they thought they had me brainwashed, they trained me in deviousness and other grownup revolutionary techniques. T h e y thought they could use me, Bigtoes. But Dirk Crouchback is going to use them!"

Bigtoes wasn't l i s t e n i n g. Crouchback had just given him an idea—one chance in a thousand of saving Santa. He dived for the phone.

"We're in luck," said Charity, handing Bigtoes a file. "His name is Colin Tanglefoot, a stuffer in the Teddy Bear Section. Sentenced to a year in the cooler for setting another stuffer's beard on fire. Assigned to a refrigerator in the DEW Line station at Moose Landing. Sparks has got him on the intercom."

Bigtoes took the microphone. "Tanglefoot, this is Bigtoes," he said.

"Big deal," said a grumpy voice with a head cold.

"Listen, Tanglefoot," said Bigtoes, "in less than seven minutes Santa will be flying right over where you are. Warn t h e grownups not to shoot h i m down."

"Tough," said T a n g l e f o o t petulantly. "You know, old Santa gave yours truly a pretty raw deal."

"Six minutes, Tanglefoot."

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"Listen," said Tanglefoot. "Old Valentine Woody is ho-ho-hoing around with that 'jollier than thou' attitude of his, see? So as a joke I tamp my pipe with the tip of his beard. It went up like a Christmas tree."

"Tanglefoot—"

"Yours truly threw the bucket of water that saved his life," said Tanglefoot. "I should have got a medal."

"You'll get your medal!" shouted Bigtoes. "Just save Santa."

Tanglefoot sneezed four times. "Okay," he said at last. "Do or die for Santa. I know the guy on duty—Myron Smith. He's always in here raiding the cold cuts. But he's not the kind that would believe a six-inch elf with a head cold."

"Let me talk to him then," said Bigtoes. "But move—you've got only four minutes."

Tanglefoot signed off. Would the tiny elf win his race against the clock and avoid the fate of most elves who revealed themselves to grownups—being flattened with the first object that came to hand? And if he did, what would Bigtoes say to Smith? Grownups—suspicious, short of imagination, afraid—grownups were difficult enough to reason with under ideal circumstances. But what could you say to a grownup with his head stuck in a refrigerator?

An enormous squawk came out of the intercom, toppling Sparks over backward in his chair. "Hello there, Myron," said Bigtoes as calmly as he could. "My name is Rory Bigtoes. I'm one of Santa's little helpers."

Silence. The hostile silence of a grownup thinking. "Yeah? Yeah?" said Smith at last. "How do I know this isn't some Commie trick? You bug our icebox, you plant a little pinko squirt to feed me some garbage about Santa coming over and then, whammo, you slip the big one by us, nuclear warhead and all, winging its way into Heartland, U.S.A."

"Myron," pleaded Bigtoes. "We're talking about Santa Claus, the one who always brought you and the other good little boys and girls toys at Christmas."

"What's he done for me lately?" said Smith unpleasantly. "And hey! I wrote him once asking for a Slugger Nolan Official Baseball Mitt. Do you know what I got?"

"An inflatable rubber duck," said Bigtoes quickly.

Silence. The profound silence of a thunderstruck grownup. Smith's voice had an amazed belief in it. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah."

Pit Stop Number One. A December cornfield in Iowa blazing with landing lights. As thousands of elfin eyes watched on their

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television screens, crews of elves in cover-alls changed the runners on Santa's sleigh, packed fresh toys aboard, and chipped the ice from the reindeer antlers. The camera panned to one side where Santa stood out of the wind, sipping on a hot buttered rum. As the camera dollied in on him, the jolly old man, his beard and eyebrows caked with frost, his cheeks as red as apples, broke into a ho-ho-ho and raised his glass in a toast.

Sitting before the television at Security headquarters, a smiling Director General Hardnoggin raised his thimble-mug of ale. "My Santa, right or wrong," he said.

Security Chief Bigtoes raised his glass. He wanted to think of a new toast. Crouchback was under guard and Carlotta and Brassbottom had fled to the Underwood. But he wanted to remind the Director General that SHAFT and the desire for something better still remained. Was automation the answer? Would machines finally free the elves to handcraft toys again? Bigtoes didn't know. He did know that times were changing. They would never be the same. He raised his glass, but the right words escaped him and he missed his turn.

Charity Nosegay raised her glass. "Yes, Virginia," she said, using the popular abbreviation for another elf toast; "yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus."

Hardnoggin turned and looked at her with a smile. "You have a beautiful voice, Miss Nosegay," he said. "Have you ever considered being in the talkies?"

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a *NEW* suspense story by

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A tale of the Old West . . . of the dangerous gamble that was played out in The Last Chance saloon in old Arcana, when two determined women, one a husky dance-hall girl from the Wild West, the other a little sharp-faced woman from the "effete" East, fought for the affections of a pitiful half pint called Tumbleweed . . .

GAMBLING FEVER

by GERALD KERSH

AS EDITOR, REPORTER, AND chief - cook - and - bottle - washer of the Arcana *Eagle,* gentlemen, it was my duty to frequent the saloons, where most news and history are made. And of all these saloons the most newsy and most historical was the The Last Chance. It was a dull day that passed there without its splash of "local color," as we would call it now; though we thought little enough of it then. What you would call an Epic we dismissed in two paragraphs as an Incident.

History, my friends, is a lot of stuff: if, in those days, you had said to the likes of Wild Bill Hickok, or Billy the Kid, or anybody like that, that he was living one of the Great Legends of the West, he would have looked you up and down and told you to mind your manners. History is an old junk heap of stale news.

I mentioned The Last Chance saloon. Some young fellow, given encouragement, could write a book about it nowadays—$8.95 a copy, with six double spreads of photographs and with reproductions of *Eagle* front pages. He would even devote a chapter or two to the characters of people like Little Sophie and the gambler Oxenford—and oh, my, what a story he could make of the duel that Little Sophie fought with Mrs. Longman for the affections of the piano player, the pitiful

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half pint that everybody called Tumbleweed on account of his hair.

The Last Chance went in for "fashionable" music; and Yak the Swede, who owned the place, had had a piano of the latest model shipped from Kansas City. Painted gold, and with silk panels and a stool to match. In a way Tumbleweed was made to match too.

He was not the sort of person you would ordinarily shake hands with, for fear of bruising him, and he always wore a pink silk tie. He cried easily, and smoked cigarettes; he had pink nails and pink eyes with white lashes. He had a mustache which looked more vegetable than animal, if I make myself clear; and he carried a pocket comb.

But he could play that piano so that it dazzled you to watch him crisscrossing his hands, and he sang sentimental songs in one of those high tenor voices that makes one feel that his back collar stud has come loose and his coat wants pulling down at the back. All the girls were crazy about him; and the girls at The Last Chance were not ones who would usually let themselves go crazy over a Tumbleweed like him.

But he had eyes only for Little Sophie, and although it was her business to keep everybody happy and she was the most popular lady in The Last Chance, anybody could see that as far as Sophie was concerned the sun rose and set with Tumbleweed. I should add that Sophie was called "little" because she wasn't.

She was a fine figure of a woman, about five foot ten and built as they don't build 'em nowadays. She could crack a tabletop with her fist, or whip a mule skinner. In a roughhouse I would rather have had Little Sophie standing next to me than almost any man in Arcana. Even Yak the Swede, who had a vulgar tongue, minded his manners when he talked to Sophie. And although she could drink a bottle of whiskey at one sitting, she was healthy as a rose—naturally rose-like in complexion, and with genuine golden hair.

Even gambler Oxenford was known to have a sneaking admiration for her—and he was the kind of man who admires nothing, respects nothing, fears nothing, and is wise to everything and everybody. You've seen his type described in stories: very pale, face without expression, flat eyes almost white, spotless white linen, thin black mustache, elegant black clothes, soft shiny boots.

He had not been in Arcana long. But he came well heeled, and they said he could play poker without blinking or leaving the table for 72 hours straight. And he had a reputation as a dead shot.

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But I was telling you about this duel.

It happened one night when The Last Chance was crowded, as usual, and Oxenford was playing in a five-handed game of stud. I was storing news items in my memory at the bar. Tumbleweed had just been playing and singing some songs that seemed to stick to your ears like molasses. Little Sophie went up to kiss him, her blue eyes full of tears, and give him some sort of pink sweet drink which he liked.

She was too big a girl to sit on his knee, so she picked him up, sat him on hers, fanned him with a handkerchief, and combed his tumbly hair. I watched this somewhat nauseating exhibition, and it occurred to me that Tumbleweed smiled exactly like a sheep.

Yes, I remember it all distinctly. Oxenford had just shown aces and queens to somebody else's aces and jacks, and was raking in a pile of chips. Somebody else was in trouble, having bet he could get four shot glasses into his mouth at once, and now he couldn't get them out. Everything was much as usual at The Last Chance.

Then, suddenly, Tumbleweed's face changed. It became the color of ashes, and his mouth looked like the mouth of a hooked fish. He said something to Sophie, and I heard her big voice asking, "Hide you, honey? What from?"

He was staring at the half doors. They had swung open, and there stood a little sharp-faced woman in dull black, wearing one of those bonnets the shape of which nobody has ever been able to describe, but which look something like a carnation and something like broccoli. They are always dull black, and they tie under the chin. In her left hand she held a sort of monstrous reticule, in her other, a long-handled umbrella.

She looked left and right through silver-rimmed glasses, and then went through the crowd—which let her through as if she had been a swarm of bees—and made for the piano. Evidently she was short-sighted. She didn't see the pianist until she was within three feet of him.

Then she said, "So that's where you are, Jeff Longman! I knew I'd find you if I looked long enough and low enough, you little monster. Get off that creature's lap, you disgusting little fiend, and come out of here. I'll deal with you when I get you home!"

Little Sophie stood up and said, "What did you call me, ma'am?"

"I called you a creature, which is better than you deserve, you common dancing girl. Take your filthy paws off that man! Get along with you, back where you belong, and dance naked among the savages!"

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Now Sophie was, according to her lights, as decent a girl as breathed, but she swallowed the insult and said to Tumbleweed, "Who is this, honey? Your mama?"

The little woman said, "I will thank you, you fat animal, not to call my husband honey to my face. Oh, I know the wiles of the likes of you—"

"I am sure you do, ma'am," Little Sophie said, "for it's always the likes of you that's the cause of 'em. Why don't you take those glasses off that you put on to make yourself look like what you're not? Then you'll see better. It's a funny thing," she said to The Last Chance in general, "that as soon as these prowlers catch themselves an innocent, the first thing they do is put on glasses. Get out—you're too little for me to hit. Too little and too old!"

The place became deathly quiet as the other woman started to belabor Sophie with her umbrella. Yak the Swede came up and said, "Ladies! Ladies, please! This is a respectable place of entertainment." Then, to Tumbleweed, "Is this lady your wife, or something?"

Tumbleweed burst into tears, as he often did when spoken to suddenly. Sophie answered for him.

"Even if she was, and I think she's a liar, who'd blame him for running away? . . . Go back to your flypaper, you little gnat!"

Now Oxenford stood up, saying to the other players, "Game's over for now, gentlemen." He pocketed his winnings and, joining the group at the piano, took matters in hand.

In his rich calm voice he said to the little woman, "Let's see, now. You say this gentleman is your husband?"

"I have papers to prove it!"

"Hmm. And you, sir, is this lady your wife?"

Tumbleweed sobbed. The little woman, at this point, began to cry also, saying, "He's all I have, and I can't live without him."

Oxenford said, "But it appears he can't live *with* you."

Tumbleweed shook his head, speechless. Then Little Sophie wept and said, "Where he goes I go!"

Oxenford said, "Mrs. Tumbleweed, the law presumably is on your side. But you cannot legislate a condition of the affections. Matters are complicated by you both being ladies. What anybody can see in this sugar-mouse I can't imagine, but that's beside the point. If you were men it would be honorable for me to advise you to approach each other from the two ends of the street with revolvers ready and arrange the matter without fuss or emotion, the survivor getting Tumbleweed—and welcome to him.

"I have seen ladies in hand-to-

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hand combat, but they were not ladylike ladies," he went on, "and your sex never fights fair. It always descends to hatpins, fingernails, and the tearing out of hair. Such a spectacle is not to be encouraged in a respectable saloon. Besides, you are hopelessly ill-matched, and I will see fair play—"

"He's not worth it, but he's mine, and I'd commit murder for him!" screams the little woman.

"He doesn't want you, he wants me. And he isn't yours, he's mine!" says Little Sophie, showing her beautiful white teeth.

"Ladies, ladies," says Oxenford, lifting a long white hand. "A word, if you please. I have heard that in France actresses sometimes fight duels. But this is not France. You have both expressed your willingness to fight for this creat—ah, this gentleman. Well, here is a test of true love. Play Russian Roulette for him."

"I abhor gambling," says the little woman.

"Ma'am, it is not so much gambling as an absolute submission to the Order of Things," says Oxenford. "Similarly, Russian Roulette does not involve your conscience. You spill the blood of no fellow human being. The game is played as follows: I have here a revolver—"

He dropped one out of his sleeve into his right hand—a neat nickel-plated revolver of small caliber such as ladies once carried in their purses, or muffs.

"—a revolver of five chambers. It having been established by the turn of a card or the picking of a straw—since you may be averse to the ungodly pasteboards—I proceed to empty this revolver . . . See, it is unloaded."

He dropped four of the cartridges into a pocket and held up the fifth.

"This single cartridge I place in one of the five chambers. I then spin the barrel several times. In turn each of you ladies presses the muzzle of this little pistol to her ear and pulls the trigger. One of you gets the bullet. The one who loses gets that prize packet now sniveling on the p i a n o stool . . . Well?"

I was never more surprised than when the little woman in glasses, with a magnified glare of hate, said, "Very well. But no cards."

Little Sophie said, "All right. Somebody give me a d r i n k A short life and a merry one!"

Now Oxenford said, "Called, so help me! I never thought you'd do it."

The news of this weird affair had gone the length and breadth of the town, and The Last Chance was now crowded as it had never been before. There was a silence as each of the two women drew a match, short one to take the first shot.

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Little Sophie got it. She was very pale as she emptied her glass, took the revolver, and spun the cylinder so vigorously that the clicking of it actually did sound something like a roulette wheel in action.

Out of the silence came the gambler Oxenford's mellow voice saying, "Four to one the little woman wins Tumbleweed!"—and there was a tremendous laying of bets.

With a sudden movement Sophie put the muzzle of the little revolver into her right ear and pulled the trigger. There was a dry click as the hammer fell on an empty chamber.

Sophie laughed aloud, and handed the gun to her rival, who first took off her glasses—a prudent woman, but game, gentlemen, game as they come. She put the pistol to her right ear. The betting against her went up.

She screwed up her eyes and stopped her left ear with a finger, evidently being averse to loud noises. A deathly hush; then a hollow click. She also had got an empty chamber, but she did not laugh as Little Sophie had done. Her mouth was as tight as the snap of a purse.

Two barrels out of five were gone; three to go, one loaded, and Sophie to take the next shot. The odds against her went up.

Some of us began to protest that this thing had gone far enough. Even the gambler Oxenford said, "As far as the betting goes, ladies and gentlemen, it's play or pay. I shall be quite happy to arbitrate the matter bloodlessly, as with a throw of the dice or the matching of coins. The ladies have both shown courage and good faith enough."

Sophie, whose turn was next, looked hopefully, I thought, at the little woman. But she, as so often happens with this puritanical type, was caught in the grip of a gambling fever. In any case, it wasn't her turn—and perhaps she reasoned that there would be time for compromise, if necessary, after her opponent had taken her next chance.

So she thrust the pistol on Little Sophie who took another drink—a big one—and looked about her. Tumbleweed was cowering behind the piano. Sophie sneered, red-faced now, for Yak the Swede's liquor caught hold fast. She drew a tremendous breath, put the muzzle of the gun to her ear, and—*click*!

She had drawn another blank. The odds were running wild now. As Sophie let out her pent-up breath, some three or four hundred pairs of lungs emptied themselves so that the lamps flickered, for we had all been holding our breath in sympathy and suspense.

The little woman took the pistol. Staring straight at Sophie

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with her small black eyes, she again put the pistol to her ear; then took it away and fastidiously wiped it with her handkerchief saying, "One cannot be too careful of contamination from creatures like *that!*" There was a murmur of admiration; everybody loves moxie, in man, woman, or beast.

Then she put the gun to her head and let the hammer fall.

Click!

She smiled now—a smile of pure malice—and handed the pistol to Sophie for the final shot.

Oxenford said, "Well, ladies and gentlemen, the book is closed. It would seem that, without disrespect, the mare wins and the filly loses . . . Well, Sophie?"

The big girl looked at the pistol, and looked at the empty piano stool, and said in quite a small voice. "No man is worth it."

She returned the revolver to Oxenford who flipped it back up his sleeve. Then she said to the little woman, "Take your tame canary to hell-and-gone out of here. He's all yours, every little bit of him. Put grenadine syrup in his birdseed at bedtime," she says, half laughing, half crying, "and I wish you luck because I admire your nerve."

Then Tumbleweed came out from behind the piano and the little woman dragged him away.

The Last Chance was never quite the same after that night. Little Sophie kind of fretted, got unsociable, and became unpopular. There was an illogical feeling among the boys that somehow she had let them down. She packed up soon and left.

Oxenford then complained that things were getting dull and slack in Arcana. So he went too.

A little later I had to go to Kansas City, Missouri, on business and stayed at the Ambassador Hotel. Who should I meet there but Tumbleweed and his little woman—only she looked svelte and lively in oyster-colored satin, quite pretty without her glasses, her eyes like stars. They were two of a foursome at a table, the other two being Little Sophie and Oxenford, all very genteel.

They invited me to join them over a bottle of champagne, and I took the opportunity of asking Oxenford, "Is it a fact that you cleared nearly thirty thousand taking bets on that Russian Roulette game?"

"Confidentially, my friend, it was nearly forty," says he.

"I often wondered. You unloaded and loaded that little pistol, Mr. Oxenford. Without questioning your integrity I have occasionally wondered if that was a live cartridge you gave the ladies to play with?"

The little woman said, with a laugh, "Oh, come, sir! Do you take any one of us for a complete fool?"

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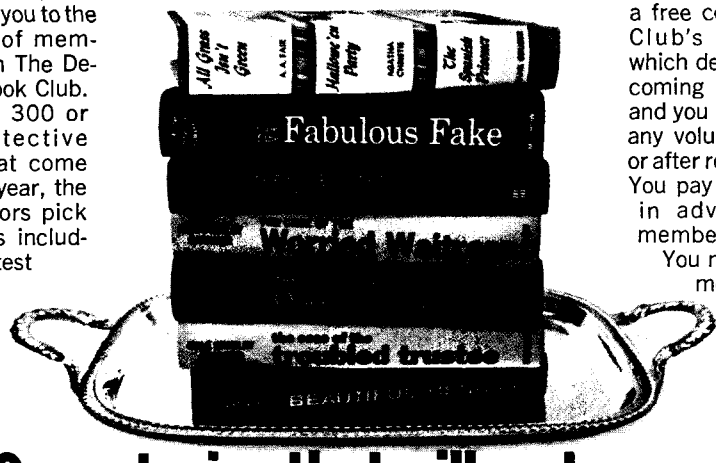

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